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## **Exploring how Social Workers Experience and Cope with Public Perception of their**

### **Profession**

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### **Abstract**

The public's perception of the social work profession is a rarely considered perspective, and yet a topic that is a concern to front line professions. This paper explores *how* social workers experience and attempt to cope with public perception of their profession.

It highlights the impact of these concerns on social workers personal experiences and professional practice. Using semi-structured interviews with sixteen UK social workers, from

Local Authority and private organisations, we explore the experiences of this group.

Thematic analysis of the data identified four concerns: experience of public perception, drivers of public perception, coping with public perception, and mechanisms to raise the professions profile and challenge public perception. Examining public perception through the

eyes of social workers provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of these professionals, and offers practical implications at both the micro- and macro-level. It reveals two key ways in which the profession can begin to address the prevailing negative perception

considered to be emanating from the public: through developing a more cooperative relationship with external sources of public perception (e.g., Government and the media), and

by engaging in more proactive self-promotion of the service.

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The social services are a sector highly susceptible to public scrutiny, with the public constituting a major stakeholder in the social work sector. As such, their opinions and perceptions of the profession are likely to have a pernicious impact on those working within the profession (Healy *et al.*, 2009; Searle & Patent, 2013). Despite these connections, scant attention has been paid directly to public attitudes towards social work(ers) (Reid & Misener, 2001). More specifically, research has yet to consider the impact of such perceptions on social workers themselves. Given that trust in the public sector has been described in recent years at ‘an all-time low’ (Hope-Hailey *et al.* 2012), the downstream ramifications of these perceptions for those working within the profession are an important matter.

While there is a dearth of attention focusing specifically on the complex relationship between social workers and one of their key referents, the public, studies from other organisational contexts can help elucidate the effects of these perceptions. Research suggests that positive interactions between employees and customers can be hugely rewarding for both parties (e.g., Schneider & Bowen, 1995), however this is not always the case and increasingly evidence demonstrates how interactions with customers can be a source of workplace stress. Dormann and Zapf (2004) highlight how disproportionate customer expectations and customers’ verbal aggression can predict employee burnout, while regular instances of customer aggression have been linked to increased emotional exhaustion (e.g., Grandey *et al.* 2004). As the primary consumer of services that social workers offer, frontline staff engage with members of the public on a day to day basis (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). As such, they

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are likely to be affected by public perception of their profession transmitted through such interactions.

Being perceived positively as a profession has important implications for staff recruitment, public acceptance of social workers practices, and an influence on the vitality and effectiveness of the profession (Reid & Misener, 2001). In addition, it is likely to influence individual social workers' sense of pride and identity. Identification with one's profession is important in assisting an individual to find a sense in his or her work life. For example, research shows that when employees believe that outsiders see their employing organisation in a positive light, they are able to "bask in the reflected glory" (Cialdini et al., 1976: 366). Conversely, however, organisational membership can also have a negative impact if employees interpret the organisations external image as critical. If social workers perceive a negative public image of their occupation this may create a threat to their self-esteem, especially amongst those who identify strongly with their profession.

To date, the focus of empirical attention in this topic area has largely centered around the media portrayal of the social services and, through this, the impact on public perception. As a result little attention has been given to the other side of this – namely social workers themselves and their experience of this. The aim of the current study is to explore how social workers experience and attempt to cope with public perception of their profession. In doing so we make two important contributions to the current literature; first, through our attention on social workers' views of public perception, we adopt an under-explored lens to examine whether, and how such perceptions might impact on social workers. Further, we differentiate the contributions of distinct external sources, including the media and Government to such

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perceptions. Second, we explore the types of coping strategy employed by social workers to help mitigate concerns that might arise due to public perception. Through illuminating a rarely considered perspective we offer insight and identify how current practices might be amended to better support those in the profession.

## **Literature Review**

### *Public Perception of Social Services*

There has been a steady decline of public confidence in a range of organisations over recent years. Longitudinal surveys, such as the Edelman's Trust Barometer, highlight the ongoing decline of public trust, with low trust an issue for those employed in the UK's public sector (Hope-Hailey *et al.* 2012). Recent high profile scandals, such as the damning reports into social work practices in Rochdale, Oxford and Rotherham (Laville, 2015) serve to undermine public trust further, and raise questions about the ethical and moral conduct of our social service institutions and their employees. Despite high profile scandals, findings from the 2012 'Which' survey (2012) showed that public sector professionals were more trusted than other occupations, offering some hope to an otherwise bleak outlook.

In considering the role of public opinion, it is important to consider that it is not necessarily the actual content of public perception that is of critical importance; rather, it is how the perceptions of the public are considered by social workers. Drawing from

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Organisational Behaviour theory, scholars are increasingly acknowledging the importance of *how* an individual experiences perception as critical in determining their subsequent attitudes and behaviour. For example, Brower *et al.* (2009) found that, in the context of leader-follower relationships, the perception of feeling trusted by the leader was a more powerful determinant of behaviour than actual trust in the leader. Research into these meta-cognitions reveals their power, suggesting that people are acutely aware of the views others hold of them, and more importantly, how such perceptions can significantly influence the attitudes and behaviours of the individual involved. Graham and Shier (2014) looked at expectations of social workers and their relationship to well-being. They found expectations emanating from communities and other professionals about the profession had implications for well-being, causing negative work experiences and stress. We contend that social workers are likely to be highly attentive to, and affected by, public perception of them.

While the present study focuses on how social workers experience public perception, it is also important to consider some of the main drivers of public perception. The media is a primary source of information regarding social services, offering insights into, and coverage of, events with which many people have no direct personal experiences. Therefore, in contemporary society, the portrayal of the profession by the media can become a socially constructed reality, playing an increasingly powerful role in shaping views (Zugazaga *et al.* 2006).

The plethora of news stories and documentaries involving social services in recent years attest to the increasing media appetite. While these can serve to bring to the public's attention the difficult work being done within the profession, more often negative stories and

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reporting prevail, and these often fail to portray the complexities of decision-making within this profession. Indeed, in child fatalities, the media often sensationalises events, seeking scapegoats to take responsibility for the events that preceded such tragedies (Chenot, 2011). The appropriation of blame is apparent in the reporting of various scandals, including the death of Baby P in 2007 (see, for example; Jones, 2014), which saw a dramatic increase in the number of care applications from local authorities following this scandal, thus attesting to the influence of media reporting. As such, it has been suggested that much of the media coverage contributes directly to a climate of fear and blame endemic for the social work profession (Ayre, 2001; Searle and Patent, 2011), in creating and perpetuating environments of public mistrust (Ellet *et al.* 2007) and a factor contributing to employee burnout, increased frustration, and reduced job satisfaction (Littlechild, 2008). While coverage of the profession in the media cannot take sole responsibility for such experiences, it has been identified as contributing to the challenges that serve to make the job more difficult (Chenot, 2011).

These studies outline how increasing media attention and scrutiny serve to heighten public awareness and place a strain on those working within the profession. How do social workers cope with such prevailing views, both personally and in a professional capacity has yet to be considered. Focusing on this aspect of social worker experience, the current study responds directly to calls requesting consideration of more positive outcomes for social workers, such as, the maintenance of their subjective well-being (Graham & Schier, 2010) through investigating coping strategies.

### *Coping with Public Perception*

Coping involves individuals' cognitive and behavioural efforts in managing stressful encounters (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), and can be classified based on the function of activities into one of two categories; problem-focused and emotion-focused modes (Ben-Zur & Michael, 2007). Evidence shows that emotion-focused strategies are of particular importance to both students and trainee social workers. Specifically, an effective resource utilised by social work trainees to minimise the negative effects of stress, and maintain a positive sense of well-being, was that of resilience (Kinman & Grant, 2011). Similarly, other individual differences, such as hardiness have been shown to be an important and differentiating characteristic for social workers (Collins, 2008). Problem-focused coping amongst social workers has also been identified in their response to media portrayals; altering the way they interacted with families, which resulted in more caution and defensiveness (Chiaroni, 2014).

## **Method**

Interviews were carried out with UK social workers between March and April 2014. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling approach, using existing contacts in the social work profession and asking them to identify and initiate introductions with potential participants. Those who were interested in the study contacted the researchers directly, and were sent an information sheet detailing to ensure their informed consent.

## **Participants**

A total of sixteen UK social workers took part in the interviews, varying in their level of experience of working in the sector. One participant was male, eleven worked within Local Authorities, while five were employed by private organisations.

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## **Procedure**

Two members of the research team carried out semi-structured interviews, lasting approximately one hour either face-to-face (at the participants' place of work, the researchers' office or an alternative quiet and confidential location) or, when time or geographical restrictions prevented a face-to-face interview, via the telephone. Telephone interviews are evidenced as a valuable medium to collect qualitative data (Cachia & Millward, 2011).

An interview topic guide encouraged participants to discuss topics of greater significance or importance to them, rather than limit the areas of discussion with specific questions. The exploratory nature of this approach allowed an in-depth examination of the narratives used by participants to make sense of, and deal with, the experiences associated with public perception. The interview guide was divided into three sections: commencing with participants' current role and experiences of working within the service (including questions, such as, 'How would you describe your role?'), Then how they thought the public saw the service (including questions, such as, 'How do you perceive public opinion of social workers?'), and finally, the coping strategies they used to deal with these perceptions (including questions, such as, 'To what extent do public perceptions impact upon you personally?'). Participation was entirely voluntary, with everyone free to withdraw at any point. Permission was granted to allow audio recording of the interviews, which were then transcribed verbatim. A £20 voucher was offered as a gesture of appreciation for participation.

Ethics Statement



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The study gained approval from XXX University's ethics committee (XXEthics).

Prior to the interviews written informed consent was obtained by all participants. Participants were advised that any identifying details of themselves, their colleagues and their organisations would be changed at the transcription stage so any of their contributions included in dissemination would be anonymised.

## **Analysis**

A contextualist thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This analytic approach allowed an understanding to be gathered of how participants assigned meaning to a situation within the boundaries of the wider social context (Braun & Clarke, 2006). An iterative approach was taken to the analysis. As such, exploration of the data did not occur at only one isolated stage of the process, but rather was inherent throughout data collection, analysis and the subsequent write-up. The analysis followed the phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006); transcribed interviews were read and re-read by the researchers who carried out the interviews to ensure complete familiarity. They were actively searching for meanings and patterns in each and across the interviews, to identify appropriate codes.

Given the exploratory nature of the research, initial codes of interest were identified across the entire data set, with low frequency codes not immediately discarded, but rather considered carefully alongside higher frequency codes, with regard to their importance for the final thematic understanding of the data. In order to ensure reliability of the coding, a proportion of transcripts (20 percent) were independently blind coded by two other members of the research team. Consistent with Patton's (1990) requirements of internal homogeneity

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(a single theme maintains a sense of coherence) and external heterogeneity (sufficient distinction evident between themes), there was a constant review and revision of codes until a consensus was reached on the final thematic coding scheme. As a result of this process, only minor disagreements in coding occurred during this process, and were resolved by discussion to reach a mutual agreement. The following section positions each of the themes within the data set as a whole, as well as providing individual accounts throughout.

## **Findings**

Four main themes were identified, including: the experience of public perception, the drivers of public perception, coping with public perception, and mechanisms to raise the professions profile. Together, these themes address the aim of the current study by providing an insight into how social workers experience and cope with public perception.

### ***The experience of public perception***

The first theme evident in the social workers' interviews concerned the content of public perception they experienced, comprising two distinct elements: those perceptions that were negative in their valence, and those considered to be inaccurate.

*Negative views:* Participants perceived a “stigma” (P6) attached to their ‘social worker’ title. Such perceptions were relatively enduring, even ‘historic’ (P4), but their effect created a sense of hesitancy from the public in terms of trusting the service. Indeed, participants went further, suggesting they felt a “mistrust” (P4) of social workers by the public.

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...ultimately what happens is you gain trust over a period of time but you start off from a certain standpoint and I think the social workers... their stand point is lower than other professions. (P3)

The above participant describes how the felt trust emanating from the public was at a lower baseline than that of other professions. Such comparison with other front line professionals was a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Discussion of the significant negativity of the profession was coupled with a sense of unfairness; social workers felt that they were always being singled out as the 'failing' profession in the wake of a negative event:

Quite often, in cases, education had been lacking or health had been lacking, but you don't see doctors or nurses or teachers being villain-ised in the same way that I think social workers do" (P4).

This sense of injustice in the treatment they receive compared to other equally culpable professions was a concern. These findings are in line with research showing that judgments of fairness stem from several referent sources, including those external to one's own organisation and occupation (Greenberg *et al.* 2007). Unfavourable comparisons can lead to perceptions of injustice (e.g. Greenberg *et al.* 2007), which in turn can lead to problems of staff retention (e.g. Aquino *et al.* 1997), making this a particularly concerning finding.

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*Inaccurate perceptions:* Participants identified a lack of awareness and appreciation from the public regarding the complex and varied nature of a social workers role:

... I think there's a lack of awareness of the complexity of the work that we have to do, or the complexity of the problems, umm ... I think a lot of people just think social worker, 'oh my God, they're going to take my kids away'. (P11)

This suggests a perceived unrealistic “overestimation” by the public of the amount of “power” social workers actually have (P12). Participants expressed frustration that such inaccurate perceptions appeared enduring and widespread, with one stating; “...there is a whole sort of group of the general population that don't know what we do and don't particularly want to know” (P10). This perceived lack of insight and reluctance by the public to engage in learning more about the profession hinders attempts to promote the service in a more positive light and to changing public attitudes.

Interestingly, these negative and inaccurate perceptions were not seen as confined to just the general public, but could also be found in other professional relationships: “of course, the sort of people that work with us aren't necessarily ... they're not blowing the trumpet about what we do because they don't want to be working with us.” (P10). In this way, social workers believed their profession was undermined not only by the wider public, but also more surprisingly, from other professional colleagues. One participant identified how their experience of school-based placements revealed the negativity and misunderstanding of teachers towards social work:

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...every single time I went into the staff room [...] the topic of conversation would be, umm, something bad about social workers [...] I was shocked. [...] I left that placement after a month because the Head Teacher couldn't see my role within the school, and that said more to me about [...] them not understanding the role of social work, than it did about the social work profession. (P5)

The above example illustrates the frustration of social workers, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and exasperated by the lack of awareness or recognition of the value of their role by these two distinct groups. In response to such experiences a feeling of professional tribalism was evident; a phenomenon whereby employment is characterised as comprising separate occupational 'silos' (e.g. Bach, 2004), with the existence of demarcations that serve to reduce the development of inter-professional working across occupational boundaries.

From a practical standpoint, in a profession that relies so heavily on the ability of professionals to communicate and work collaboratively, such occurrences are worrying. Feeling shunned, and even distrusted by other professionals, may serve to create barriers between social workers and key groups, such as teachers, police and doctors, placing additional strain on service providers. As one participant reflected:

Police don't go around telling doctors what to do, do they? Doctors don't go around telling police what to do or, doctors don't go around telling teachers what to do. Bonkers. Why do they feel it's okay to do that with social workers? (P11)

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### ***Drivers of public perception***

The majority of participants felt that public perception of the social services was influenced in two key ways: first, through an external group, including the media and Government, and second, derived from users' personal experiences with social workers. Detailed examination revealed a contrast in the perceived valence of public perception of social work(ers) between these two drivers.

*External factors:* The Government was identified as responsible for the perceptions currently held by the public towards social workers due to their widespread influence over public attitudes and beliefs. In the aftermath of social work scandals, one participant described her disappointment with the reaction of a specific political Party, who she believes "condemned social workers" and showed a "lack of leadership" towards the general public (P11). Such actions must further undermine the position social workers perceive their profession to be held in compared to other front line staff.

Indeed the coalition Government in power at the time of the interviews was judged to place minimal importance on the role of social work in relation to other societal considerations. For example, participants highlighted the Government's view of the profession as damaging to the quality of care and service they could provide because they "...just don't see social care as a priority so it's not something that they are going to spend money on or time" (P9). However, participant's indicated responsibility for challenging the "preconceived negative idea" of the service remained with the Government (P9).

The interviews revealed a widespread view that the media is fundamental to the shaping of the publics' understanding and perception of social services: "the main factor will

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have to be the media because that's the thing that reaches the most amounts of people” (P12).

For some service users, the ready availability of the media opens it up to being used as a weapon: “They don't get what they want, they're threatening to go to the papers. ‘There'll be another Baby P you know’, I've heard that a few [...] times” (P11). This threat by service users and the ongoing skew in stories highlights the vulnerability of this profession “... you only ever hear the bad news. [...] you don't ever hear of the really good good work that happens because it's not, you know, sensationalist news” (P16).

*Based on experience:* An apparent paradox between service users' perceptions of social workers generally, and views of 'their' own social worker emerged prominently in the findings. Participants revealed how direct contact with (or experience of) a specific social worker did not correspond to the tainted views discussed previously; for example, one participant described how they had “worked with service users who say to me, ‘oh, you're okay, but I don't like normal social workers’” (P2). For service users', all 'other' social workers became homogenised in the same “stereotypical negative” (P3) way the media often depicts them. Such disparity between service users' perceptions of 'their' and all 'other' social workers places social workers in a complex position; despite being able to achieve direct positive interactions with users (Schneider & Bowen, 1995), this is insufficient to alter their negative feelings towards the profession more generally.

Although important, this finding should not be overplayed as social workers also reported continued feelings of threat, and the necessity of being vigilant when interacting with the public and service users. Participants described their fear that they might do something wrong and end up at the centre of a serious case review, with being shamed publically feeling like a very real possibility. Accordingly, they reflected how they were "more risk averse in taking

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positive risks” (P5) because of concerns about the professional and personal outcomes of their actions:

... you always kind of think, ‘oh my God, I don't want to end up in the Papers’... That's at the head of it isn't it really. [...] ...when something goes wrong, if you're doing statutory work, there is the likelihood that it will land up all over the place. (P11)

### ***Coping with public perception***

The experiences and implications surrounding public perception necessitated a need for coping, with participants describing the various ways and mechanisms used to try and cope, which can be categorised into two distinct groups; corrective behaviours and sense-making cognitions.

*Corrective behaviours:* In response to negative public perception many participants identified a direct impact on their practice: “the things that get levied at social workers, the criticism, I do my very best to make sure that I don't show any of those traits in the area that I work in” (P3). In particular, they felt it was important for social workers to “do what they say they're going to do, when they say they're going to do it...”(P8).

For some participants, these negative preconceived notions of the public were regarded as a welcome challenge: “...in some ways I relish it [...] they can have a pre-conceived idea, and I hope to better that” (P7), as well as a sense of personal accomplishment:

It is a challenge [...] you've managed to forge a good relationship with



somebody, who in the beginning thought you were going to be really poor,

[...] you gain a sense of achievement from that. (P16)

These social workers revealed active attempts to try and correct misperceptions through actions that portrayed the professionalism and care that were not considered prototypical of their profession in the eyes of the public. Such corrective behaviours may contribute to the previously highlighted conflict in views service users have regarding ‘their’ social worker and the profession more generally. This finding is in line with recent theorising suggesting that when an individual perceives a threat to their (professional) identity they may respond in several ways, one of which involves trying to directly change the attitudes of individuals or groups who are the source of the identity threat. This identity-protection response is termed ‘positive-distinctiveness’ (Petriglieri, 2011).

Most participants were united in a particular behaviour —the hiding of their ‘social work identity’. Strategies included the “rewording” (P14) of their work identity away from the term ‘social worker’, or changing their external appearance to make them appear less like the stereotype: “I’m dressed in my dress down clothes and I’ll make sure no one knows who I am” (P2). Despite making these conscious changes, such necessities were not welcomed: “that’s like a negative impact because you should be proud of what you do” (P14). This type of concealment is a form of identity-protection in response to those facing identity threat (Petriglieri, 2011).

Such examples of identity-protection responses may decrease the likelihood of identity harm in the face of perceived identity threat. However, such responses do not appear to alter the views of the threat’s source, in this case, publics’ perception of social workers. Therefore

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as a means of minimising potential identity harm, individuals must maintain, over a sustained period, these behaviours (i.e. concealment and positive distinctiveness), yet using such responses, as a long term coping strategy can be problematic. For example, concealing a stigmatised professional identity can produce considerable psychological strains and challenges. Indeed, research suggests that those who feel they need to conceal their identity are more likely to leave their jobs (Côté & Morgan, 2002).

*Sense-making cognitions to facilitate coping:* While corrective behaviours reflect actions to try and alter their working environment and thus, public perception, cognitive strategies reflect social workers attempts to make sense of, and cope with their experiences within these environments. Specifically, all of the participants described how they felt able to accept the negativity, and to continue working in spite of it. For some, this was done through accepting that they "...can't control what the public feel" (P3), while others reflected that while their profession may be necessary, they are never welcomed: "no-one really wants a social worker in their life, that's a fact. Even people that need social workers, [...] so it's not like a welcome role." (P4). The coping strategies being used by social workers focus on maintaining their sense of self-preservation, ensuring their own sense of purpose and importance in society is not hampered by external perceptions of their worth. Finally, there is also an acceptance that it is a "tough working environment and you almost have to be tough to survive in it unfortunately" (P1), attesting to a resilience which is required. The acceptance of needing to be 'tough' potentially forms part of social workers self-preservation armory, preventing negative public perception from impacting them negatively. More worrying however is the issue of how social workers acquire these strategies and become tough. How do those who are slower to develop the resilience necessary to 'survive' in the job fare? What

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are the consequences of the speed of adaptive strategies on their subsequent progression and career?

### ***Mechanisms to raise the professions profile and public perception***

When asked directly what could be done to improve public perception of the service, three main categories emerged: better internal promotion, increased direct support from Government and more positive media reporting.

*Better internal promotion by the profession:* Participants outlined how better self-promotion of the profession, is a potentially influential, yet underutilised means of influencing public perception in a positive direction. Participants identified how their profession should adopt the self-promotion techniques used by private companies:

I mean companies and organisations are very good at promoting themselves and almost, in a way, social workers belong to an organisation and they need to promote it [...] it needs to come from the School of Social Work and that sort of thing to promote you know the organisation. (P5)

Some suggested The College of Social Work (TCSW) could be a useful and existing vehicle to promote the service. Yet while already purporting to this, its efforts seem ineffective:

I know the College of Social Work, one of the purposes was to kind of raise the profession's standing, but I don't think it's really

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done it to be fair, [...] there's no sort of promotion, no-one's saying

[...] this is the difference that social workers make (P4)

It became apparent over the course of the interviews that the positive promotion of the profession on a nationwide level felt unobtainable; however, more local actions (i.e. corrective behaviours) were identified to benefit the profession as a whole:

So it's something which is much easier I think for individual workers to tackle on a level which they meet face-to-face, you know, day-to-day, as opposed to the bigger picture" (P9)

Whether this self-promotion comes in the form of the individual social workers aforementioned corrective behaviours, or active "selling" (P3) by a professional body, participants believed they could take greater responsibility in changing public perception. These behaviours appeared to be something that many were already enacting on a daily basis.

*Government backing:* Several participants expressed how "more faith and positive outlook from politicians" (P6) would, in itself, be a significant benefit to the service. This would offer a more positive grounding from which public perception was informed and be able to feed information outlets, such as, the media.

*Positive reporting in the media:* For the majority of participants simply experiencing a 'good news story' (P14) about their profession would be extremely welcome, and uncharacteristic of their present portrayal. Some efforts, made in recent years, were acknowledged, such as those that shine a more positive light on the role of social workers,

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through various more ‘realistic’ documentaries (P15), and the provision of more positive examples in television. However, others acknowledged that changing public perception via the media would not be an easy task:

with the British media you do feel that actually the newspapers don't necessarily want to be publishing positive stories. [...] so I think it is a bit of an uphill battle. (P10)

## **Discussion**

This research examined how social workers experience public perception. Adopting the largely underutilised lens of the social workers themselves, we revealed the content of these perceptions and, more importantly, the impact of such perceptions on employees’ experiences at work and the coping mechanisms they adopted in response. The themes identified offer valuable insights and reveal a number of theoretical and practical implications, which contribute meaningfully to the extensive literature on social work.

The findings reveal social workers regard public perception as being both primarily negative in content, and beset by inaccuracies regarding the nature of their roles. While the media were identified as a primary source driving these perceptions, the Government was also acknowledged as playing a significant role. Further, this unfavorable view of social workers, and particularly their competence emanated not only from the general public, but also from other professionals with whom they might interact and collaborate on a daily basis.

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This lack of support from allied professionals appeared to exacerbate the negativity of the situation facing these social workers.

Although methods of coping have been studied empirically in the past (e.g., Graham & Schier, 2010), this research has typically examined how social workers cope with the pressures of the job - focusing on workload and emotional strain, rather than revealing these preventative strategies. The coping strategies identified from this research are particularly informative, for example, identifying the deliberate use of corrective behaviours (i.e., always arriving on time) as an attempt to challenge preconceptions and to dispel the inaccurate stereotypes of service users and members of the public express towards the profession as a whole. Further, the approaches adopted, such as the active hiding of their work identity represents steps taken to alter the environment that these professionals find themselves interacting in (Ben – Zur & Michael, 2007). In addition, social workers' attempts to cope involved making sense of public perception in a way that directed the blame away from them and contributed to their self-preservation. The public scrutiny social workers perceived they were under resulted in distinct adaptations to their behaviour, including being more risk-averse, as an attempt to mitigate the biased views they perceived the public held of their profession. Such concerns are mirrored at an organisational level given the increases in regulation and accountability for the profession (Brown, 2010).

While negative public perception may not be entirely unexpected due to the current context within which social services are couched and the prevailing literature, this study builds on existing knowledge of social workers to identify *how* these metacognitions regarding the public are experienced, and the consequences for their adaptive coping. Extant

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research has identified important push and pull factors for this profession, indicating the impact of a prevailing culture of blame and feelings of fear as significant determinants of social workers desire to leave (Littlechild, 2008; Searle & Patent, 2011). Although the experience of public perception in isolation may not constitute a significant push factor, this study suggests that it creates a pervasive and ongoing pressure, which does influence social workers' practice and behaviours. Taken together with other factors, it may cumulatively contribute to staff turnover. Further, and worryingly, many of the social workers in the present study believed that the negative views described would always dominate, even in the face of direct and contrary evidence. Strikingly, feelings of vulnerability and fear emerged prominently within these interviews. While clearly the social work role does entail risk and the stakes are understandably high, this additional attention and pressure in managing public perception and the associated coping, highlights the cognitive load and resultant strain currently being placed on those in this critical service.

### **Practical & Wider Implications**

A number of practical implications can be garnered from this research, as well as wider implications. The study suggests value of presenting a more coherent picture of social work to the public, in order for attitudes to be meaningfully changed. While the responsibility for this has typically been left to the media, the present study reveals it is currently not working in favor of the profession. Social workers reflected that more needed to be done actively to identify and utilise success stories (while still upholding confidentiality), and provide a more accurate insight into the role and the extensive training of those in the profession in order to counteract the current prevailing negative views. It is clear that direct

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exposure alone to positive social workers is insufficient. Showing the complexity of decision-making in cases where incomplete information is common might go some way to showing the dilemmas faced for each of the different parties. Such insight may go some way to raise awareness, if not realign public perception and reduce the fear and feelings of vulnerability felt by social workers.

Micro-level self-promotion of the profession, such as the use of corrective behaviours, was identified as a means of countering some of the prevailing views. Many of those interviewed identified how the public, on encountering them and their work hold a distinct and more positive view of an individual social worker, but the negative perception of the profession overall appeared to endure. Therefore, while such efforts at the micro-level are important in giving individuals a sense of control, in order to make a more sustained challenge and change to current stereotypes they need to be enacted in conjunction with wider macro support. Clearly, both the government and professional bodies, along with the media have a role to play. While the introduction of The College of Social Work in 2012, and the work of the British Association of Social Work (BAWS) have gone some way to addressing this concern (Warner, 2014), the interviews suggest more could be done. It is perhaps of some significance that BASW was not identified by any of the participants as a potential source of promotion for the profession. Social workers perceive that only through these external sources endorsing their profession, in conjunction with their own individual self-promotion efforts, can the potential profile of the profession be raised.

### **Future directions**



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The intention for this study was to be an instigator for further research. An obvious direction is the extension of this study to a wider and larger sample, obtaining the perceptions of more people in the profession would have a clear benefit to the practical implications identified. A further direction would be to specifically target organisations at the heart of a national 'scandal'. Public perception of a service confirmed as having failing standards, or in not protecting the vulnerable, would potentially be more prominent, stronger and specifically targeted to that organisation. Understanding the impact of this corroborated negativity, and understanding how it is coped with, would be of vital importance to helping organisations facing damage limitation in their workforce. While the current study can go some way towards contributing to a better understanding of social workers' current experiences and the coping strategies used to buffer more general public perception, coping in the wake of such events is likely to manifest itself rather differently.

A further area of future study would be to actually gauge public perception. As mentioned previously, the 'Which' survey (2012) revealed that public sector professionals were more trusted than other occupations suggesting a disconnect between what public perception actually is, and what it is perceived to be. While ultimately it is what the social workers perceive public perception to be which is of importance, considering the accuracy of these perceptions is also crucial, particularly in the development of targeted initiatives aiming to identify and address such negativity.

## **Limitations**

The main limitation to this study is the sample, which could be considered both limited in size and unfairly representative of women. The practical reality of social work

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however is an underrepresentation of males in the profession. The current sample is therefore, a reflection of this. As with the majority of qualitative research, reaching a saturation point with the data collected was the primary aim. After sixteen interviews no demonstrably different or new themes were identified, suggesting our coding of the data had reached a clear saturation point.

## **Conclusion**

This study examines the lived experiences of social workers and their views of public perception, offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of these professionals, and how they seek to counterbalance and control the difficult context in which they have to operate. The practical implications that arise represent tentative suggestions, rather than a comprehensive solution to this complex and sensitive topic. As with other public sector organisations, the social services appear to have operated in a largely reactive manner, when faced with negativity, particularly in the press. Social workers would appreciate a more proactive strategy, which pre-empts such efforts to degrade the professions reputation and instead promotes profession-enhancing content (Zugazaga *et al.* 2006). Self-promotion, which is supported by external bodies and public outlets, offer one way for the social services to begin to address and reverse prevailing negative public perception and contribute to a more balanced understanding of the social work role.

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