

Lessons from media representation of social work and social problems

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Given the role played by the media in shaping and reflecting public opinion on uncomfortable and contested issues, it is important to know how social work, social workers, clients and social problems are represented by the media. This paper will look at how two UK newspapers represent domestic violence towards women and child protection, related social work activities, social work clients, and social workers at two points in time, applying a content thematic analysis to these representations. The key findings highlight that the media coverage depends largely on the ideological stance take by the newspapers' editors, and the specific style of the newspapers. By and large social workers are portrayed as ineffective and uncaring, clients as either exploitative and manipulative, or lacking in strength, with some exceptions. The social problems are depicted mainly through personalised stories, at times sensationalised. When sensationalised, women victims of domestic violence are portrayed in an unflattering way, while the perpetrators are glorified; children victims of abuse are portrayed only as innocent victims while their parents are described as perpetrators of their abuse. These representations are taking place within a context in which people living in poverty are perceived as "scroungers" by the more right wing newspaper. The more left wing newspaper adopts a more respectful approach to social work clients rather than to social workers, while being critical of government welfare policies. The media representations will be analysed in terms of the values and action messages sent to the lay public and to politicians about social work, and their location in the current prevailing approaches to welfare policies.

keywords: social work, media representation, domestic violence to women and children