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# Social Workers in the New York Times: A National Portrayal

Heather Smoley

*St. Catherine University*, [hasmoley@gmail.com](mailto:hasmoley@gmail.com)

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# Social Workers in the *New York Times*: A National Portrayal

By

Heather Smoley, B.S.W.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
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Master of Social Work

Committee Members  
Jessica Toft, MSW, Ph.D., LISW  
Dina Gavrilos, Ph.D.  
Nick Johnston, Ph.D., LICSW

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### **Abstract**

Social work is a profession that is diverse and difficult to define, and the way in which social workers are portrayed in the news provides information on the profession to the general public. There is little previous research on the subject of social workers portrayed in the news. To fill this gap in information, this study seeks to answer the question of how are social workers portrayed in national news stories published by the *New York Times* from 2010 to 2015. A textual analysis of 50 *New York Times* articles was collected using ProQuest Newsstand. Articles were then analyzed using grounded theory. Major themes that emerged included: how social workers are defined, what roles they play, stereotypes of social workers and their clients, the politics of emotion, and newsworthiness of social workers. Social workers in these articles are often vaguely defined and seldom the subject of the story. Future studies should help to further the understanding of how these portrayals influence public opinion and policy that govern the practice of social work.

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Social work can be a difficult profession to define as social workers are found in a variety of settings and perform different duties depending on their level of education, licensure, and job requirements. According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), a social worker is defined by professional training and education so that “only those who have earned social work degrees at the bachelor’s, master’s or doctoral levels—and completed a minimum number of hours in supervised fieldwork—are professional social workers” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2015). The use of the word professional highlights the fact that not all those who self-identify, or are called social workers are educated and trained by the standards cited by NASW. Barth (2003) states that according the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately 30% of those who identify as social workers do not have a college degree, let alone a degree from an accredited school of social work. Even the *Encyclopedia of Social Work* focuses on profession and professional identity rather than defining social workers by giving an overview of the historical developments and social movements that influence practice (Hopps, Lowe, Stuart, Weismiller, & Whitaker, 2008). Therefore, while the profession of social work has a strong idea of its definition, the general public does not.

In the United States, over 607,300 jobs were held by social workers in 2012 (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2012). However, this statistic does not provide insight on how social workers are defined for this census: by job title, job description, license, education, or self-report. According to a study by NASW, in 2004 only 38% of respondents who identified as social workers were licensed practitioners (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006). Defining the profession is further complicated as “the term social worker is defined so broadly in different organizations and settings” (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006, p. 5). Social workers

are employed in areas that include: medical facilities, mental health, child and family services, schools, government agencies, rural, and urban areas (NASW, 2011).

Furthermore, most social workers need to be licensed; which requires them to have completed specific educational requirements and passed an examination administered by the state in which they practice. Licensing requirements vary by state, from licensing for an individual with a high school diploma as Massachusetts and Michigan do, to the six states only licensing at the clinical level (Association of Social Work Boards, 2013b). Standardized educational requirements are set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) for schools with accredited social work programs (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). Both education and licensure can describe the type of work a social worker does as most social work positions require a bachelor's degree in social work, while some require a master's degree along with a licensure that corresponds to education level or area of practice (NASW, 2011).

Most licensed social workers are also required to complete ongoing education to maintain their credentials. This is particularly true of social workers at the clinical level. As a specific area of practice, "clinical social work practice is the professional application of social work theory and methods to the treatment and prevention of psychosocial dysfunction, disability, or impairment, including emotional and mental disorders" (NASW, 1989, p. 1). Clinical social workers are specifically licensed in all 50 states, with various names and requirements including minimum education requirements of a Master's of Social Work and specific additional education in clinical practice, passing a licensing examination, and a requirement for supervised practice. Thus, the education requirements are monitored and level of competence to protect the public is demonstrated through licensure exams and ongoing licensure requirements such as continuing

education. These requirements also serve as one way to determine who is and is not a professional social worker.

Along with standardized education, licensure was part of the push toward professionalism from the 1920s in the United States. The California League of Women Voters introduced legislation at the state level to establish a credentialed license for social workers in 1928, since which time the license has been viewed as a way to both enforce standards of education and practice while also protecting professional identity (Wenocur & Reisch, 2001). In 1978 the first incarnation of the Association of Social Work Boards was established to both protect the public and establish standards across state boundaries, and today also including Canadian social workers. The organization began issuing their first standardized test in 1983 and now administers over 34,000 tests annually (Association of Social Work Boards, 2013a).

The practice of social work is also governed by policy, often specifically social welfare policy, which dictates what individuals or groups may receive services, how those services are delivered, what service providers may work in a given area of practice, and the circumstances for continuance or termination of services (Karger & Stoesz, 2014). Funding for social services may also come from public or private entities. In addition to professional ethics and government regulation, social workers are also held to the program requirements and rules of their employers. Social workers are found in public and private agencies, may practice privately or as part of an interdisciplinary team, and work with individuals, groups, and communities (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006).

The convergence of policy, funding, and professional identity is complicated and does not further clarify the definition of social work as a profession. All of these intersecting concepts are very difficult to explain, and so news stories may rely on easily understood, stereotypical

portrayals. Consequently, when social workers are mentioned in the news; often the most attention getting stories center on a tragic event and the social workers are often simply defined, such as child protection workers. These events cause writers to question the professionalism of social workers and their ability to perform their jobs effectively (Warner, 2013). The way social workers are described in these stories creates a narrative of who social workers are and what they do for the general public. However, generalizing from one instance of child protection failure to questioning the professionalism and abilities of social workers is a narrow representation of a long-standing diverse and credentialed profession.

The largest professional organization for social workers is the National Association of Social Workers (NASW). NASW boasts over 132,000 active members in 55 chapters across the United States (NASW, 2013). In regards to a professional image, this organization provides an entire section of press releases on their website focused on the organization's reactions to social policy and news, and linking to awards and accolades received by members (2015). While these representations of social workers in diverse and positive lights are therefore available here, it is arguable that the general population will rarely access these stories as they are specifically geared toward social workers on a website sponsored by NASW. However, the existence of such attention to media coverage by a professional organization speaks to a belief that the influence of news stories and press releases are important to social workers and the profession at large.

The portrayal of social workers in newspapers provides a narrative that describes the profession to the audience of those stories. Information provided through the media, including both entertainment and news, may provide a description of the profession to many people who do not directly interact with social workers (Olin, 2013). The ways in which social workers are portrayed in the print media may have a large impact on the profession; language used to

describe social workers and the work they do in news stories may influence both the way clients view social workers, and the way politicians discuss legislation and funding for social services. For instance, Kearney (2013) asserts that the publicizing of non-accidental child deaths and the political turmoil regarding them “strengthens the use of heuristics and leads to biases in the media, policymakers’ and public’s understanding of risk” (p. 63). In Minnesota, for example, after the death of four-year old, Eric Dean, who had been brought to the attention of child protection through 15 reports of suspected abuse (Stahl, 2014), the Governor of Minnesota established a taskforce to address child protection because “recent cases have brought to the forefront the maltreatment of children and the need to review the standards of child protection” (Dayton, 2014, p. 1).

While these are just two portrayals of social workers in the print media, there are many more. This study seeks to examine how social workers and the social work profession are portrayed in newspaper stories. With all of the diverse aspects of social work as a profession, defining the profession is a complex task. News stories may be a primary source of information on the profession for people who do not know a social worker. This study seeks to explore how social workers are portrayed in national news stories.

### **Literature Review**

Understanding who social workers are and how they are reported in the news requires an understanding of the history of social work and social workers and current social work practice. Furthermore, how the profession of social work sees itself, the common stereotypes that apply to both social workers and their clients, and an exploration of previous research into news coverage of social workers. The history of social work as a profession traces back to established roles for social workers as helpers, reformers, and clinicians, and their respective philosophies. Social

workers today fill those roles and still work with the same groups of people. The stereotypes attached to the clients social workers interact with and serve are often reflected back on social workers themselves. Furthermore, when social workers are mentioned in the media, there are patterns to the portrayal which incorporate these stereotypes and historical influences.

### **Historical Influences of Social Work Identity**

In the United States, the Industrial Revolution of the mid to late 1800's resulted in the establishment of several professional organizations. Before social work became organized and worked toward identifying itself as a profession, volunteers, religious organizations, and charities worked to help fill some of the duties that social workers now perform. These volunteers were mostly middle class or upper-middle class and mostly white women with education and privilege, but little access to employment (Wenocur & Reisch, 2001). Columbia University hosted the first formal class for social workers in 1898, starting the tradition of educating future professionals through a university (NASW, 2015). The goals of providing a standardized education and uniform method, and striving for a professional identity at this time was a mirror to other professions like the American Medical Association, which helped its practitioners establish control over the market and obtain economic advantages for members (Wenocur & Reisch, 2001).

While working to establish a paid, professional identity in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, social workers also served to further dominant cultural values in the United States (Day & Schiele, 2013). Early pioneers of social work were responding to the consequences of the Industrial Revolution on society as a whole and more specifically on people living in increasingly urban environments. In this role, social workers served dual purposes: as the providers of services and as agents of social control. Professional identity in the early phases of

development, therefore, was often segmented with different groups emphasizing these two different purposes and respective approaches (Wenocur & Reisch, 2001). Two of the biggest movements at this early stage, which arguable emphasized services or social control are still influential today; the Charity Organization Societies and Settlement House Movements.

Together, these models helped establish the values, ethics, standards, and professional identity of social work.

**The COS movement.** Charity Organization Societies (COS) of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century were the United States offshoot of the model of social service established by the London Charity Organization Society. Organizations would work together to provide services and coordinate efforts, and eventually were influential in the education of social workers in several areas of practice, notably as philanthropists, COS workers, and child savers. National conferences of the COS movement eventually led to the establishment of schools of social work (Stuart, 2013). The COS s also began to document case information and keep statistics on poverty levels, unemployment, and disease prevalence, creating a bureaucratic approach to their work. This also meant that the organizations were seen as preventing fraud by keeping track of clients to prevent an individual or family from receiving aid at multiple agencies (Day & Schiele, 2013).

Workers within this model of practice were compassionate and caring, but also served as gatekeeper against what was seen as abuse of philanthropy and charity, identifying them as agents of social control (Lubove, 1965; Stuart, 2013). As a movement, the COS was focused on elevating the practice of social work to a profession through standards of practice that were universally applied and practiced. The movement focused on rationality, scientific inquiry, and promoting charity in a way that aligned with the increasingly urbanized world of the industrial

revolution. Workers within the movement were tasked with assessing need and referred clients to volunteers known as “friendly visitors” who would go into clients’ homes and provide advice and assistance (McNutt, 2013). In this way, the COS enforced social control by only allowing those who had been deemed worthy of aid to receive help through their organizations and enforcing dominant moral standards on those deemed deviant by advising on proper “moral” behavior. Furthermore, the COS movement emphasized that clients should work in order to receive aid, despite high unemployment rates at the time, thereby setting a standard of behavior that combatted the immorality or personal failings believed to be the root of poverty (Day & Schiele, 2013).

One of the early textbooks used in social work education also comes from the COS model of practice (Day & Schiele, 2013). Mary Richmond (1917) provided notes on everything needed for a social worker to perform their duties in assessing the worthiness of everyone from widows to children to the mentally ill with her book *Social Diagnosis*. Included in the text were pages of questions to direct at an individual or family, instructions on gathering information from landlords, employers, extended family, and neighbors and instructions on how to use information gathered to assess the client (Richmond, 1917). Essentially, Richmond created a forensic template to deem a petitioner worthy or unworthy to receive charity or aid. Gaining a thorough understanding of individuals and families, the COS workers sought to correct the individual moral failings which result in poverty. COS workers thought that by addressing these underlying individual and family symptoms, poverty could be eradicated (Poppo, 2008).

**Settlement house movement.** At the same time as the COS movement worked at establishing professional standards in social work education and practice, the settlement house movement also began serving the poor and disenfranchised in large urban areas in the United

States. Settlement houses were also basing their practice on an English model like that of London's Toynbee Hall (Stuart, 2013). Middle-class college-educated women would move into poor areas of a city and establish centers for adult education, socialization, and aide. In the context of settlement houses, workers often interacted with newly arrived immigrants and so sought to find culturally appropriate solutions to larger problems within the community.

Addressing these urban issues became increasingly complex as the population of the United States grew and diversified. In the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, this became an increasing need as large numbers of immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe, Asia, and Mexico came to the United States. From 1900 to 1920, the population of the United States grew from 46.8 million to over 100 million (Day & Schiele, 2013). As populations boomed in large cities, illness and disease became concerns alongside poor working conditions for newly arrived immigrants. These problems were compounded by racism, sexism, and classism that controlled funding and public policies that governed the Settlement House efforts.

Settlement house workers not only worked with people from their neighborhoods, they engaged in activism and social reform. The roots of group work are seen in this setting, as groups from the community were used to help research and better address the needs of all community members (Moore Plionis, 2006). Settlement houses worked apart from the COS because the focus was less bureaucratic, and focused less on moral failure but emphasized environmental and social justice needs (McNutt, 2013). These efforts at changing the systems also manifested in the association between settlement house workers and various social and political movements. Women working in the settlement houses were closely associated with movements for women's rights, labor unions, and the protections of children. Settlement houses

and their workers encompass both the roots for group work and community organizing in social work (Day & Scheile, 2013).

Settlement houses bridged the space between the middle-class women who ran the houses and programs, and the poor immigrants who used their services. Women working in the houses lived in the neighborhoods they served. Workers in the houses focused on group work, community action, and eventually became advocates for policy that would benefit their clients (Day, 2008). Settlement house workers became leaders for social reform movements that benefitted the poor and worked as community developers within the cities they occupied and on a national level. Most famous among the settlement house movement was Jane Addams, who established Hull House in Chicago, Illinois. Addams, along with other settlement house founders also supported movements including those for civil rights and women's rights in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Meyer, 2013). Florence Kelly, who worked with Addams at Hull House, was appointed to the Illinois State Bureau of Labor and Statistics, where she investigated and lobbied for fair labor practices and wages for women and was involved in the Women's Suffrage movement. Julia Lathrop, Lucy Flower, and Addams also joined efforts to lobby for the establishment of the first juvenile court system, with Lathrop later becoming the first woman appointed as the head of a federal bureau (Day & Schiele, 2013).

The women of the settlement house movement embodied several levels of social work practice. They worked with individuals who lived in the houses or utilized the services offered, with families and groups of people to solve problems in the community, and within government and larger social movements to change policies and enact reforms. Settlement house workers encompassed micro, mezzo, and macro levels of social work practice by simultaneously addressing the needs of immigrants, women, children, and the poor on all levels.

## **Social Work Beliefs and Public Perception**

**Contemporary practice of social work.** Social work embraces both of these movements today through practice that incorporates education ethical standards across a spectrum of settings. The term social worker is often used broadly to describe the work done in many different settings from community organizing to individual private practice. Of all areas of practice, the most common specialty area for social workers is in mental health, followed by healthcare settings, and child or family development, working with aging adults, in schools, and with adolescents in that order. A 2006 survey of licensed social workers found that 37% of respondents listed their practice area as mental health, with 13% working in health and another 13% in child welfare or family support (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006). In 2008, there were over 642,000 jobs held by social workers in the United States. The number of social workers is expected to grow through 2018, with the largest need for new workers specializing in working with older adults and in rural areas (NASW, 2011). Similarly, the U. S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics (2015) found that 649,300 people in the United States were employed as social workers in 2014 and also projected a 12% growth rate over the next ten years, higher than the average expected growth for all areas of employment.

Today's social workers also see themselves as highly educated and trained, a perception reinforced by the results of a 2004 national survey that found 79% of actively practicing licensed social workers in the United States have a Master's degree in social work and an additional 2% hold a Doctorate (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006). In the United States, accredited social work programs are governed by the standards set by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). This organization oversees the educational requirements are met for social workers at 509 Baccalaureate programs, and 245 Master's programs as of 2016 (CSWE, 2016).

Most social work licensure requirements include that a degree is obtained from one of these accredited programs. In addition to baccalaureate and master's degrees and licensure, social workers with graduate degrees may also pursue advanced generalist practice with two years of supervised experience, or clinical practice with two years of specific clinical experience and supervision (NASW, 2013).

The National Association of Social Workers provides a code of ethics that stand as a standard for practice for all licensed social workers (NASW, 2008). These ethics include ideas espoused by both the COS and Settlement Houses. Social workers are expected to serve their clients, as the COS sought to establish, but also work for social justice and environmental change as the Settlement Houses emphasized. The NASW Code of Ethics sets boundaries and expectations of professional behavior for social workers, including processes for addressing possible violations of the code. The ethical standards serve as guides to practice and decision making for social workers (Abbott, 2013).

### **Client Stereotypes and Social Work Archetypes**

Stereotypes are generalizations about a group of people, which ignore the complexities of individuals. While stereotypes often relate to prejudices, stereotypes are not always negative or malicious (Lasorsa, 2008). Furthermore, as related to media and stereotypes, the media can help perpetuation of generalizations through helping develop, reinforce, and validate stereotypes. This is especially true for groups which the audience has no personal experience, thus influencing the opinion of the audience (Appiah, 2008). The creation of in-groups and out-groups through stereotyping can also be seen as a reflection of power because stereotypes repeated in the media can serve as a form of control (Lasorsa, 2008).

Social workers and their clients are intrinsically linked because they are dependent on each other. The practice of social work exists to serve the needs of specific populations or to fill specific needs for society. Clients receiving assistance or services from a social worker are reliant on those supports. Furthermore, stereotypes about who social workers serve also play a role in how the public views social work (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). Social workers are often associated with the poor, single mothers, and the mentally ill. In order for social workers to effectively perform their duties, they must gain the trust of clients through close interactions. This proximity can be seen as threatening to blur the lines for those subscribed to an in and out group view of socioeconomic status (Warner, 2013). Social workers develop close relationships with the clients they serve, and may be associated by this relationship with the same characteristics ascribed to the client population. Close association with the poor, single mothers, and the mentally ill are part of this connection. Given this, one narrative is likened to the role of the mother and all that comes along with it; good, caring mothers should play a specific role of nurturer and the failure as nurturer leads to dependency on social services (Dominelli, 2002, p. 44). Female social workers either fulfill this same stereotype of caring and compassionate, sometimes overly so, or are viewed negatively as cold and bureaucratic in the course of their work (Warner, 2013).

The association with clients is also reflected in what roles are deemed appropriate for social workers. One survey of public perception found that 91.3% of respondents thought that the title of “child protector” was a suitable role for social workers, but only 57% believed that “mental health therapist” was an appropriate role. That same survey also found that although the respondents acknowledged that social workers practice with diverse groups of people, 23% also agreed that “Social workers primarily care for people on welfare” (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004, p.

168). This statement connects the perception of social workers with the stereotypes of the people they are believed to serve most often, specifically those in poverty. Those stereotypes are important because when they are held as the example of a profession, they help define and shape ideas about social work and the policies that govern both social worker and client (Warner, 2014). In British news articles, the same class and identity descriptors used for poor, underclass parents were also used to describe the social workers who had failed in their obligation to protect a vulnerable child (Warner, 2013). This last example also connects the aspects of the poor as unfit parents with the need for social control through the responsibilities of child protection social workers.

**The myth of the welfare queen.** Both social workers and clients receiving services are subject to the rules and laws that govern the administration of services. Furthermore, both the social workers, and those seeking to utilize social services tend to be predominantly women, while administrators in social service agencies and legislators tend to be male (Dominelli, 2002). Those who make and amend policy are not reflective of those utilizing social services. Social workers are subject to upholding policy changes whether working for a government agency or in private practice (Dominelli, 2002). One of the largest myths about welfare is the archetype of the “welfare queen” that became simultaneously popular in policy debate and coverage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA). News coverage at the time reflected stereotypical ideas about those living in poverty and receiving benefits. Stories showed the intersection of race, gender, age, and poverty with overrepresentation of young African American mothers in national television news stories (Kelly, 2010; Luther, Kennedy, & Combs-Orme, 2005). National news stories focused on the hypersexualized, lazy, African American woman who cannot raise her children properly (Kelly,

2010). Social workers in this context are the administrators of new policy changes that enforce these rules to combat the stereotypical ideas associated with the “welfare queen” so as to correct the moral failings of these women.

Poverty in this context is seen as a moral failure of the individual rather than something that results from institutional barriers which also reinforces stereotypes and reduces empathy for those receiving welfare benefits (Luther et al., 2005, p. 27). Many of the stereotypes about poverty are related to the Protestant Work Ethic pervasive in American society which states that there is a difference between the worthy and unworthy poor. The unworthy poor being those who can work, but refuse to do so through personal fault often seen as laziness (Day & Schiele, 2013, p. 9). In studying variances between states in the southwest and southern United States, Brown (2013) found immorality and dependency of welfare recipients consistently appear in discussion by state legislators and newspapers regardless of the racial or ethnic group being discussed with the exception of whites. She also finds that the focus on individual character flaws and moral failings is also accompanied by the adoption of more punitive policy as a strategy to reduce dependence. Again, these policy changes will be administered to individuals and families by social workers as a means of social control.

**Mental health.** Social workers are the largest provider of mental health services in the United States, comprising 60% of the workforce in this area; more than psychiatrists, psychologists, and nurses combined (NASW, 2011). Those seeking help with mental health also face specific stereotypes and stigma, which is reflected in how mental health or mental illness is discussed in news media and policy debate. One of the most glaring examples of this is the association between gun violence and the discussion of mental illness following a mass shooting. The shock and disgust induced by these instances often manifests in a moral panic that result in

public outrage and policy changes directed towards both those with mental illness, and those who work with mental health systems including social workers (Paterson, 2006).

In both television and newspaper stories over a 16-year period, 70% of the stories related directly to a specific mass shooting and discussed mental illness, but “did not mention that most people with SMI are not violent” (McGinty, Webster, Jarlenski, & Barry, 2014, p. 410).

Similarly, Webster (2005) found that in analyzing newspaper coverage of two murders, media representations of mental illness were incomplete and inaccurate. All of the articles used phrases that included “crazies in the streets” and “a schizophrenic with a fondness for guns” (p. 65). The concern is that inaccurate information leads to a belief that mental illness is associated with violence and crime which will be reflected in policy that seeks to contain, punish, or restrict the rights of people with mental illness. In turn, policy that governs how practitioners are reimbursed, and how they many work with those struggling with mental illness. Policy changes not only change how clients are treated, but may restrict funding for clinics and agencies to provide services (Paterson, 2006). Essentially, social workers and other mental health professionals are subject to changes in policy to correct the perceived errors made by those professionals. The pattern is similar to that described as the moral outrage which leads to a cycle referred to as the “politics of emotion” in which social workers are vilified following the non-accidental death of a child (Chenot, 2011).

**Poverty as laziness.** Public perception of social work includes the belief that social workers often work with people receiving welfare. Despite income assistance constituting less than 1% of the specialty areas in a national survey of social workers (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2006), a survey of general beliefs showed that 23% of people believed that “social workers primarily care for people on welfare” (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004, p. 168). In the

case of welfare reform with PRWORA, public opinion changed over time to become more distrustful of the welfare system by the early 1990's and less sympathetic to those receiving benefits. Much of this shift in attitude focused on the moral failings of the individual rather than environmental or institutional causes of poverty. Changing the way the public perceived those receiving assistance served to reinforce an idea that they were somehow at fault or morally responsible for their own failings. This shift in public opinion allowed politicians from both major political parties to work together in their reform efforts directed at a specific program (Christian, 2008). These changes to welfare policy enacted served to further social control of those in poverty: utilizing a "work first" ideological framework, eliminating benefits to immigrants, penalizing women and children who did not establish paternity, and restricting access to post-secondary education (Deprez, 2008, p. 129). Social workers administer these policies, thereby becoming the gatekeepers of assistance and the protectors against abuses of the systems. It also incorporates the use of social control, in which immorality and poverty are related and so moral standards must be established to receive aide. In this context social workers both help access services or welfare, and enforce policies that restrict the ability of people to access those same systems.

### **Social Work and the News**

**Framing in the media.** The selection of certain aspects of a perceived reality by social actors helps to form a frame. Frames are used to communicate an interpretation of that perceived reality, and promote a particular definition of a problem, moral evaluation, or resolution of an issue (Pan, 2008). Political actors and social elites tend to desire frames which prime the reader to accept or influence what people think about an issue or policy. Frames that slant in favor of a particular powerful group, or their ideologies, tend to give greater power to that group (Entman,

2007). Rose and Baumgartner (2013) find in their analysis of the frames used to discuss poverty over time, that as frames shifted from discussion of systemic causes of poverty to individual responsibility, the policies addressing poverty became less popular and government programs became less generous. How an issue is framed in this instance connects public perception and policy action.

**The politics of emotion.** While welfare reform reflected a slow change in public opinion over time, political change also comes as a reaction to a specific incident, referred to as the politics of emotion. Specific incidents of high profile cases may result in attention being drawn to specific failings of systems or individuals. Social workers often work with people who are dependent and mistakes by social workers or within a system have a human cost. Public outcry following the non-accidental death of a child is often followed by moral outrage. The cycle represented by the politics of emotion is one where a child death becomes a news story, a political reaction to public outcry ensues, and policy changes are made as a response to the pressure created by the moral outrage expressed by the public (Chenot, 2011). Often, the new policies are intended to prevent any further child deaths. However, although the death of a child is a tragedy, the expectation that no child should die from non-accidental means is unrealistic and unattainable, resulting in policy change directed at social welfare agencies, social workers, or at “vulnerable” children that are often ineffective at reducing risk to those children (Kearney, 2013). There is also a process of “othering” inherent to the cycle of the politics of emotion. As politicians, news media, and the public align themselves with those who suffered or were victims, social workers are often villainized (Warner, 2014). Media reports of child abuse and neglect or non-accidental child deaths also focus on the faults of a specific agency or workers within an agency. Systematic issues and the contributing factors other than personal

responsibility of the workers are largely ignored (Chenot, 2011). Here, social workers are held responsible as individuals for a failure that results in the non-accidental death of a child. In another example, an analysis of both news articles and political discourse following the death of “Baby P” in London, England, both discussions used similar language and focused on the social workers involved as stereotypical “folk devils,” closely associated with the moral failings of the underclass (Warner, 2013, p. 230).

With the politics of emotion, there is an intersection of class, social control, and the relationship of social workers to those they serve. Policy change that follows these incidents reflects a need to control the “underclass” and further “common sense” solutions to the failings of child protection systems, management, and social workers (Warner, 2013, p. 221). The cycle also lends itself to a constant ebb and flow between two extremes. Policy following an incident will add layers of oversight to agencies and workers. However, a subsequent incident will blame those bureaucratic layers for the failing of a social worker or agency because the worker lacks common sense and is too concerned with paperwork to be effective (Chenot, 2011; Warner, 2013). These policy changes not only add to paperwork or alter the ways in which social workers practice, but change the culture of agencies. Even when investigations conclude that nothing could be done to prevent a tragedy like a non-accidental child death social workers are portrayed in reports as having failed and change to practice and policy is recommended to remedy the situation (Kearney, 2013).

**Social workers’ concerns over image.** As was the concern of early social work pioneers, contemporary social workers desire to be seen as educated professionals with specific skills and knowledge. There is a concern among social workers over how the profession is portrayed in various types of media because the image presented influences public perception

and policy decisions (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). Additionally, social workers fear that the image presented to the general public can influence whether or not individuals who could benefit from the services of a social worker will seek out or utilize those services (Zugazaga, Mendez, Surette, & Otto, 2006). Public perception of social workers is most directly influenced by knowing a social worker, but television and newspapers were the next most popular source of information in a study of general public opinion (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). In a survey of state legislators, one study found that news media, although not named as the most influential, was named by most representatives who self-reported sources used to gather information and make decisions on legislation and policy (Jackson-Elmoore, 2005).

**Previous research.** There are few studies on social work in news or entertainment media. International studies from Great Brittan and Ireland cite the existence of NASW in the United States as an important difference between how the news media portrays social work in the United States and other countries. The studies find that social workers are not as negatively portrayed in the United States as they are in Great Brittan and Ireland. Both studies cite NASW as a possible buffer or are able to temper negative narratives of social workers or social service in news media (Warner, 2013; Gaughan, & Garrett, 2012). Although two studies assert that NASW serves to temper reactions and provide information on social work as a profession that helps create a less hostile and more positive perception in the news, neither provides evidence to support the claim.

Other theories as to why social workers are portrayed more positively in the United States include the difference in population and geographical regions, and a higher educational standard in the United States (Reid & Misener, 2001). This is important because social workers are bound by professional ethics that include protecting the confidentiality of their clients, which creates a

“culture of silence” among social workers (Gaughan & Garrett, 2011; Warner, 2014). Similarly, Reid and Misener (2001) found that stories in the United States were far less negative in their portrayal of social work than those in the United Kingdom, but that certain areas of practice were uniformly viewed as positive or negative no matter the country. Specifically, social workers who are engaged in areas that exert more social control such as child protection, are seen more negatively across all countries and those who are featured as experts in articles or are profiled for program innovation are more likely to be positively portrayed (Reid & Misener, 2001).

In-depth studies reveal the close association between othering of those who were responsible for the death of a child and the social workers, agencies, and government systems with which the child and mother interact. In a case study of Baby P, a child who’s death resulted in murder convictions for his mother and her boyfriend, the establishment of The Munro Review of Child Protection, and the dismissal of social workers, administrators, and the director of Children’s Services for the Haringey Borough of London, England in 2007. Social workers were presented by newspapers, television news, and politicians as lacking common sense, cold and inhumane, and too tolerant of abhorrent conditions under which the baby lived and died (Warner, 2013). In this case, the cycle of emotional politics followed the public outrage with political pandering and the formation of a government inquiry into the agency and social workers involved (Warner, 2014).

In the United States, two studies were found which explored the portrayal of social work in the news media. A comparative study of social work portrayed in entertainment and news media found that both presented social work negatively more often than positively, but that social workers overestimated how negatively they are portrayed and how often negative portrayals are featured (Zugazaga, et al., 2006). Although the overall portrayal may not be as

negative as social workers think, the roles most closely associated with positive attention are also less likely to capture attention. The authors assert that “a positive story about a new foster-care programme may be less likely to catch the reader’s eye, or may have less of an impact, than a story involving a social worker being tried for negligent homicide for the death of an abused child” (Reid & Misener, 2001, p. 199).

### **Research Question**

The previous literature that explores social workers in news media is limited, and concentrates mostly on how positively or negatively the story reflects on the worker or profession. The most recent literature from the United States that was not a case study or systematic review dates back to 2006 and so a gap in information exists over the last several years. This gap includes the time during which the NASW Communication Network aligned with the NASW Foundation. The merger of these organizations in 2008 promotes a stated purpose of providing accurate information about, and portrayals of social workers in the news and entertainment media (Social Workers Speak, 2016). In the United States, the *New York Times* boasts over 66 million readers and over a million online subscribers. The paper is often cited as the “paper of record” for the United States (Flamm, 2015). Therefore, the research question for this study is: How are social workers portrayed in national news stories published by the *New York Times* from 2010 to 2015?

### **Conceptual Framework**

#### **Social Construction Theory**

According to Schneider and Ingram (1993), the theory of social construction asserts that the portrayal of a group of people in regards to imagery and language impacts not only how that group is perceived, but can influence policy through the adaption or changing of those images.

In this theory, “social constructions are manipulated and used by public officials, the media, and the groups themselves” (Schneider & Ingram, 1993, p. 342). Social constructionism may be used as a means to analyze language as a construct of a society. Language is influenced by societal norms, and language can be used to convey ideas of quality or value and may reflect influence of recent events. In turn, events and information is remembered through this specific language (Galbin, 2014).

### **Discourse Analysis Theory**

Although in completing a textual analysis there is no oral dialog; discourse theory may still be applied to the written word. The emphasis on the way a subject is discussed is still relevant and some colloquialisms and language structure will be evident in written word (Weber, 2003). Fairclough (2008) argues that language should be adapted to the audience, not every article written should be aimed at a general audience. This holds that the author of an article will reflect their intent and purpose in the language used in the writing process. Further, critical discourse theory explores the links between power, social inequality, and discourse. Power and influence are institutionalized and legitimized through both news and entertainment media in addition to societal structures (van Dijk, 1993).

### **Methods**

The articles analyzed were taken from a search of articles in the *New York Times* a major newspaper from the United States in order to further the understanding of how social workers are portrayed in news media. A search of ProQuest Newsstand utilizing the key words “social worker” or “social workers” from January 1, 2010 to December 31, 2015, narrowed by publication to the *New York Times* will be used to obtain articles for this study in order to perform a content analysis.

### **Research Design**

Social workers have been concerned with how the profession is perceived by the general public and other professionals from the beginning efforts at creating a professional identity (Wenocur & Reisch, 1989). This study focused on how social workers are portrayed in the *New York Times*, a newspaper with national circulation, through qualitative use of textual analysis. A study on media framing and poverty found that the *New York Times*, when compared to four other major newspapers from across the United States, did reflect the general focus of news stories in all of the comparison papers (Rose & Baumgartner, 2013). Beyond whether the social worker featured in the article is portrayed in a positive or negative way, this study seeks to find patterns in the definition of social work and social workers including roles, professional identity, and under what circumstances articles are written.

### **Sample**

Articles from the *New York Times* published between January 1, 2010 and December 31, 2015 were analyzed in which the exact term “social worker” or “social workers” appeared as a subject or title term. All articles were collected for further sample selection. A total of 123 articles were collected using this search criteria, a systematic sampling was conducted to narrow the sample to 50 articles. Articles were sorted by date from oldest to most recent, then every second article was selected for inclusion. The resulting 62 articles were further narrowed to 50 after an initial reading found several articles that did not include enough information for analysis.

### **Data Collection**

The search engine ProQuest Newsstand was used to find articles that were relevant to this study from the *New York Times* between January 1, 2010 and December 31, 2015. The keyword “social worker” or “social workers” was used to find articles in which the exact phrase appears in

the article title or subject. Only full-text articles were used; event postings, obituaries, and society page wedding announcements were excluded because they did not contain information relevant to the purpose of this study. Any article that did describe or portray a social worker, their education and licensing, or information about the work they perform was excluded. This ensured that enough language pertaining to the identity of the social worker was available in each article to conduct the data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

**Grounded theory data analysis method.** Grounded theory data analysis method is relatively broad and involves the coding of transcripts or texts in an inductive analysis through the text. As coding progresses, open coding gives way to the creation of a new framework based on themes found in the literature (Padgett, 2008). Grounded theory is systematic in its approach and allows for rich understanding of the data without constrictions. While working from open coding toward theme development, the theory allows for the use of sensitizing concepts derived from the literature to aid in the process.

In this study, grounded theory was the method for analyzing the literature by open coding and creating a code book from themes found in the text and those that fit the key concepts highlighted from critical discourse theory. The theory lends itself well to be used for the analysis of existing text. Grounded theory data analysis method also allows the researcher to search for themes and look for patterns in the text itself. This is important because little literature exists on the topic of social work as portrayed in newspapers, and broad overview of the subject serves to create some of the foundation which would normally be found in previous research. Coding was completed in three phases: the first was an open coding, the second began the development of themes, and the third refined those themes.

## Findings

During the analysis, four main themes with several subthemes were identified which related back to the question of how social workers are portrayed in the *New York Times*. Many of the themes found in the articles used in this study are similar to the themes discussed in previous literature. These themes were: defining social workers, roles of social workers, stereotypes, the politics of emotion, and newsworthiness.

### Defining Social Workers

The concept of who is and who is not a social worker often is defined by education, training, and credentials in the form of licensure. However, the use of the title of social worker is often used to describe the type of work performed or the specific role a person fills. In the articles analyzed here, social workers described often followed this looser definition. Who is a social worker in these news articles is variously attributed to several different uses of title, education, or roles fulfilled.

**Titles for social workers.** Although the terms used to search articles were specific, the results were less so. In coding several articles, multiple different titles were used to describe the same person performing the same job. Even social workers performing the same job are identified differently within the same article from. When discussing how a young boy came to the attention of child protection workers, the author stated that after a judge awarded custody to his father, “Myles was monitored by city social workers in the Administration for Children’s Services” (McKinley, 2014a, p. A.16) and, “the judge required Mr. Wade to remain under the supervision of child services workers for a year” (McKinley, 2014a, p. A.16). The terms city social workers and child services workers are used interchangeably in the article, but neither is defined. In a similar way, another case in which child protection workers were involved, but a

child was beaten to death by a stepfather. The article focuses on the social worker and supervisor responsible for monitoring the family. After the child died, the social worker was charged in the non-accidental child death, but is referred to by the titles “caseworker,” “social worker,” and “A.C.S. (Administration for Children’s Services) worker” all of which are used interchangeably to describe the same person (Secret, 2011, p. A.1). Another example of this is from an article in which a man was helped to find stable housing after Hurricane Sandy, “he moved into his own home, a one-bedroom apartment in Flatlands, Brooklyn, that his case worker had helped find. ‘If it weren’t for her, I’d be sleeping on the floor,’ he said of Amanda Kremer, a safety net social worker (Farmer, 2013, p. A16).

Social workers were also named as therapists, supervisors, and volunteers in various articles.

Dr. Mark Smaller, a Chicago psychoanalyst, started the program at Morton Alternative three-and-a-half years ago as a contrast to schools that take a strict disciplinary approach to youths with behavioral problems. Dr. Smaller and his team of social workers conduct weekly group and individual therapy sessions... (Breu, 2010, p. A.27A)

Groups of social workers and their singular actions or responsibilities are also found, “repeated interactions with the Florida Department of Children and Families did not save the children, even though court records show social workers sent the parole authorities to the Spirit home” (Alvarez & Robles, 2014, p. A.20). In this instance, no specific titles are given other than social workers, but the agency is mentioned to designate their specific area of practice. This is one way of identifying the type of work done, but it is unknown if the social workers in this story have social work degrees or licensure. The article gives no indication as to who these social workers are, or what the qualifications are to make decisions about the Spirit family children that could have

saved their lives. Without these pieces of information, the social workers in the article could be experienced practitioners with graduate level degrees or county workers without a background in social work.

**Education and licensure.** Only three total articles mentioned the education of a specific individual social worker, with two articles mentioning licensure. In profiles of the workers themselves, their education is mentioned as part of the qualifications or training received for the job they do. A social worker arrested in Cuba on suspicion of espionage, “Details about Mr. Gross and his work in Cuba slowly began to emerge this week. Mr. Gross studied social work at the University of Maryland and the Virginia Commonwealth University” (Thompson & Lacey, 2010, p. A.8). This article mentions that Mr. Gross studied social work, but does not state what degree or license he holds.

The same is true for a social worker helping middle class families who find themselves in financial or housing crisis, “Ms. Weiss, who has a master’s degree in education and a social work degree from Yeshiva University” (Mascia, 2011a, p. A.26). In this instance, a social work education is mentioned, but not her licensure and the reader is left to assume what a social work degree denotes or if the education Ms. Weiss completed was at a bachelor’s or graduate level. The only specific example of education in the articles was from a profile on an agency that helps newly arrived immigrants. In the article, one of the employees was interviewed, “he arrived at Cabrini as an intern in 2005, and started full time after he obtained his master’s degree in social work from Hunter College” (Gonzalez, 2012, p. A.21).

Licensure is mentioned less often than education. An August, 28, 2014 article outlines the difficulties of treating mental illness in those without health insurance. While the Affordable Care Act expands access for millions in Louisville Kentucky, mental health practitioners and

those needing care both experience difficulties adapting to the new influx of those in need of help. In interviewing a social worker adapting to the changes brought by the Affordable Care Act to mental healthcare, the author notes, “Tana Jo Wright is doing her part to treat new Medicaid recipients with mental health problems. It is just not as easy as she would like. A licensed clinical social worker, Ms. Wright opened her own practice last fall” (Goodnough, 2014, p. A.1). The only other mention of licensure as a necessity for employment was in regards to a social worker experiencing unemployment who “received a grant of \$294 from the Neediest Cases Fund, the cost of taking the New York State social work licensing exam” (White, 2012, A.18). The latter article is referring to a social worker receiving services, rather than helping others access them. Licensure is needed for her to gain employment; no other article in this study referenced a license as necessary to obtain a social work position.

### **Roles of Social Workers**

When social workers are not identified by education or licensure, the type of work they do is the default definition of social work. With social workers in many diverse settings and fulfilling different types of practice, the roles stereotypically assigned to social workers seem to be the identifying factor. These roles can vary based on the setting and population being served, but are often a reflection of stereotypes of social workers as helpers, gatekeepers, or experts on a particular population. Several of these roles were featured repeatedly in the articles, which seemed to help define social work or the social worker.

**Navigator and helper.** An article profiling a long-term volunteer who is repeatedly identified as a social worker in the article, but who does not have a social work degree is an example of naming a social worker by role,

Ms. Rainford, a widow and a mother of five, was a schoolteacher in New York City...

Ms. Rainford retired in 1987. When she applied for Social Security and Medicare, she discovered a six-week training course for people who wanted to volunteer to explain government benefits to other new recipients. (Mascia, 2011b, p. A.22)

This volunteer is labeled as a social worker as she helps patients at a medical center navigate programs and services while also displaying compassion and kindness. The work she does is similar to that performed by social workers in other areas.

The idea of “navigator,” however, is quite evident in that social workers are most often described as a person who gives or controls access to various services, sometimes acting as a knowledgeable navigator of bureaucracy, or a gatekeeper to determine who can access services. A social worker who serves Holocaust survivors describes her job, “I review cases to determine clients’ eligibility, and I help plan philanthropic events. I also work with clients to obtain services for them” (Olsen, 2015, p. A.24). In this description, the social worker serves as both the access point to services and the person responsible for restricting access to those who meet eligibility requirements.

Some of the descriptions of social workers and their jobs are very short. In 15 articles that described programs and people that benefit from The *New York Times* Neediest Cases Fund, social workers were often described as the person who accessed, arranged, or applied for the funds for clients who needed to repair a vehicle and buy furniture and clothing (Grynbaum, 2010). Other articles highlight the social worker as the person who advises a family where to seek assistance from the fund (Warren, 2011). Social workers also applied for cash assistance so that clients can pay rent (Buettner, 2010) or purchase specific medical equipment that is not covered by Medicaid (Kern-Jedrychowska, 2012). In these cases, social workers have the

knowledge and ability to access specific funds to help with an immediate need for clients; they serve as the gatekeepers to the fund.

**Experts and collaborators.** Another role found in the literature is that of expert on a subject or population. Social workers are interviewed and quoted as individuals or a professional organization is cited as experts in an area based on their practice and education. Individuals working with a specific population can offer insights like job training for youth and young adults who do not have a high school diploma or General Education Diploma,

Blue Sky's focus on vocational skills is "a smart way to go," said Paul Fagen, a social worker with Communities in Schools of Chicago, a nonprofit that connects low-income students with free social services. "When you teach mastery of skills, you build self-esteem." (Reaves, 2011, p. A.25.A)

In this instance, Mr. Fagan is presented as someone who has experience working with this specific population and his opinion furthers the idea that job skills are a good way to support young people in this community. The end of the quote also connects the skills training provided with helping the mental health of the youth in the program, and the social worker is the one who makes this connection.

Social workers were often presented as part of a group of professionals who are experts on an issue, "Doctors and social workers have long said that medical care alone is not enough to address the health woes of the poor, which are often related to diet, living conditions and stress" (Eckholm, 2010, p. A.15). Other groups that include social workers may include people without professional training, but a vested interest in a population,

But despite the signs of resilience, social workers and parents say the children are newly vulnerable-a reality the Philippines will need to deal with as it stumbles though a flawed

relief effort that has failed to provide basics like food and medicine fast enough... “the children you see, yes they are playing, yes they are laughing,” said Manneth Catina, 25, a social worker... “But because of the difficult situation, deep down inside they still have fear.” (Ramzy, 2013, p. A.12)

In this case the social worker agrees with parents of children in the aftermath of a typhoon about the effects of the natural disaster. Social workers not only hold an opinion or expert knowledge, but also work as part of a team with similar goals. Pointing out the failures of the effort to provide basic needs also takes the tone of the ethical voice in this article. The social workers and parents are giving a realistic assessment of the lasting effects of the typhoon, but also the efforts to support these children in the aftermath. In Afghanistan, a group that includes social workers, nurses, and former addicts work together in the streets of Kabul to distribute clean needles and gather used or discarded ones. The work done by this group is a direct service in areas of the city populated by men with opium addiction. This group, from Medecins du Monde (Doctors of the World), is using their collective knowledge in an attempt to stem the spread of diseases like H.I.V. (Rubin, 2011). Social workers are also utilized as experts in articles by citing opinions from a professional organization. An article about training doctors to spot elder financial abuse, “the National Adult Protective Service Association, the group for social workers who handle abuse cases, are backing the program” (Olson, 2011, p. F.11), cites the professional organization as the experts supporting the training program.

The final way in which social workers are portrayed as experts is evident in multiple articles when they are charged with enforcing rules or laws. For New York City, the federal government filed a lawsuit because the city, “ignored rules requiring recommendations from doctors, nurses and social workers before patients could be enrolled in the home care program”

(Hartocollis, 2011, p. A.1). Social workers are again part of a professional group, but in this instance are legally granted the expert opinion to qualify or disqualify an individual for specific types of Medicaid benefits. It should be noted that several paragraphs later in this same article, the same group of professionals is again addressed, but social workers are omitted from the second list. This role was also used in a less favorable way,

North Carolina began sterilizing men and women in 1929 after social workers, county health departments and eventually a state board deemed them too poor, mentally disabled or otherwise unfit to raise children. The 7,600 victims of the program, which was dissolved in 1977, were largely women and disproportionately members of minorities. (Severson, 2012, p. A.14)

Social workers in this article are granted the power, by law, to determine who is sterilized and who is fit to be a parent. Their expert opinion results in forced sterilization as part of a eugenics policy that targeted certain members of the state as unable to properly raise children. A previous article on the same subject also cites social workers as agents of this policy, but also gives context to the fact that social workers were carrying out laws that were popular at the time, “wealthy businessmen, among them James Hanes, the hosiery magnate, and Dr. Clarence Gamble, heir to the Procter & Gamble fortune, drove the eugenics movement” (Severson, 2011, p. A.1). The article goes on to highlight other prominent proponents of the eugenics movement on the national level, including President Woodrow Wilson in the 1920’s and 1930’s. The programs were seen as a popular form of social engineering, eventually leading to 32 states adopting some form of a eugenics program (Severson, 2011). Social workers were part of this movement, and did have a direct role in designating individuals for sterilization, but they were also carrying out laws and policies that were popular and seen as necessary to civilized society.

**Other roles in the literature.** Other roles for social workers included researchers, community organizers, child or family services, mental health workers or therapists, and volunteers (Semple, 2010; Gentleman, 2014; Sayare, 2011; Romero & Lacey, 2010). Child and family service workers were often held to the standard of being a child protector. The role of volunteer was applied in situations of natural disasters like hurricanes, where social workers would volunteer to help in the aftermath, “As the recovery drags on, a growing need is for mental health care. Scott Feldman, a social worker for the Visiting Nurses, answered a call on Wednesday night for volunteers on Staten Island, where he lives” (Leland, 2012, p. A.23). There were also articles in which no specific role or area of practice is given, only a description of social workers as helping with accessing services (Fernandez, 2010, p. A.28). In many of these settings, social workers are still serving as helpers and navigators or as someone with experience of a specific area or population. However, many of these descriptions were short and did not include information on education or licensure, or the specific definitions of a role.

**Dual dependency of social workers and clients.** The dual dependency of social workers and their clients is exemplified in several articles that profile social workers who have also utilized the agencies and services they serve in a professional capacity. After Hurricane Sandy, in November of 2002, housebound seniors needing healthcare were served by an agency providing services in-home. Many of the clients have health conditions that prevented them from evacuating before the hurricane, so nurses, aids, and social workers travel to provide care in places without electricity and with continued weather making travel difficult. One of the clients profiled was Jill Gerson, “who teaches social work at Lehman College” (Leland, 2012, p. A.23), she needed medical assistance because she was stuck in her home after the hurricane. Another example is that of Ms. Marquez, “I always kept in mind that I could be the one in the shoes of

my clients,' Ms. Marquez said of the switch in roles from social worker to client" (White, 2012, p. A.18). The social worker in this case became a client to another social worker in order to receive assistance after she was no longer able to work.

Former clients also become social workers, as a social worker at the Cabrini Immigrant Services agency decided to help others who had benefitted from the same services by going back to school and changing professions from engineering to social work. The decision came after he had been a client at the same agency and wanted to give back to the people who had helped him. However, the agency is in financial trouble and in danger of closing after an associated nursing home was closed by the Roman Catholic Church (Gonzalez, 2012). While clients worry about finding another agency or organization to meet their specific needs, the social workers also face an uncertain future. For the young man trying to give back after changing professions, he may have to find another way to fulfill his personal mission if the center closes.

Another example of dependency is the way in which social workers and their clients both need each other. As one article states, "as long as there have been homeless people sleeping in Times Square, there have been social workers and city officials trying to persuade them to leave" (Bosman, 2010, p. A.1). This is a clear illustration of how social workers livelihood is tied to the population which they serve. In this instance, if the homeless disappear, so would the social workers from Times Square.

This is also true of the ways in which both clients and social workers both must navigate the same laws. In June 2011, an article highlighting the growing number of same-sex couples adopting children also addressed the difficulties these couples face. For same-sex couples looking to adopt, different states have different laws granting or restricting their ability to adopt as individuals or couples. Social workers are also bound to these same laws, "in Arizona, which

passed a law recently requiring social workers to give preference to married heterosexual couples” (Tavernise, 2011, p. A.11). The law in this article requires the social workers to discriminate against same-sex couples and will hinder the ability of those couples to adopt in the state of Arizona.

When the Affordable Care Act expanded reimbursements for mental health care, a clinical social worker opened her practice to clients using Medicaid. However, the reimbursements have been slow from some managed care companies, and so she is not getting paid and is unable to take new clients. “‘It’s been months and months,’ she said, ‘It’s always there in my mind: Am I going to make it?’” (Goodnough, 2014, p. A.1). A complicated system makes both obtaining and administering mental health services difficult for client and social worker.

### **Stereotypes**

**Caregivers.** Stereotypes exist for both social workers and their clients. Social workers are often cited as being good listeners or understanding and empathetic with their clients (Mascia, 2011b). In an article outlining the experiences of a man struggling with depression after a health crisis revealed he had lost his health insurance despite working as a home health aide for years, both the term social worker and caseworker are used to describe the people who help Mr. Gozalez attain supports like Medicaid and start to address his emotions,

Ms. Morales lent Mr. Gonzalez an ear, allowing him an opportunity to air his grievances and vent his frustrations. This meeting started a shift in his disposition; Mr. Gonzalez called Catholic Charities and Ms. Morales “a light” that lifted his spirits. (Otis, 2012, p. A.33)

In this article, social workers provide both material needs and fill the role of a kind person to talk with in order to address emotional distress.

Social workers are also portrayed as empathetic, trying to understand and adapt to their clients' feelings and needs. In January 2008, a social worker on Staten Island, New York is profiled in an article that discusses the economic crisis faced by middle-class families in the area. Ms. Weiss, a social worker providing services to this community, working from 8 in the morning to 10 at night. Not only does she work long hours, but she strives to help clients feel less ashamed about their situation and makes house-calls, "which allows clients to keep their financial distress under wraps" (Mascia, 2011a, p. A.26). This social worker is devoted and caring, taking into account how the clients would feel if their neighbors knew they were receiving services from a social service agency.

**Bureaucratic and unfeeling.** Social workers can also be seen as cold and detached, as in the case of forced sterilizations in North Carolina in which social workers were charged with the power to decide who would be sterilized,

A social worker from the Washington County Department of Public Welfare suggested that she get sterilized. Mrs. Ramirez said that she did not understand that the procedure was permanent and thought she had no choice. "They told me that my brothers and sisters were going to be in the streets all because of you," she said. "It's either sign the paper or mama's checks get cut off." (Severson, 2011, p. A.1)

In addition to being part of this extreme form of social control, social workers in this case were also acting without empathy or compassion. They were carrying out laws that were common for the time and which were popular in the United States. Social workers are bound to uphold the laws that govern their profession and the services they administer. These laws change over time

to reflect dominant social values, in this case the state of North Carolina charged social workers with administering a policy that was aimed at lowering poverty, shrinking the number of people receiving welfare, and improving the gene pool by eliminating undesirable characteristics through sterilization. However, social workers are highlighted in this article as the ones who not only carried out these policies, but did so through coercion and threats, dehumanizing Mrs. Ramirez in the process (Severson, 2011). Social workers in this case did not create the eugenics movement nor were they responsible for creating laws and policies that targeted individuals for sterilization, but they did carry out the laws as a reflection of the social values of the time.

**Overworked and understaffed.** Another common representation of social workers is that they are often overwhelmed. In an article on smaller German cities trying to cope with the influx of refugees from Syria in 2015, social workers are a needed commodity. “But the costs are being felt as social workers grapple with overcrowded reception centers and officials scramble to house asylum seekers while applications grind through Germany’s complex bureaucracy” (Smale, 2015, p. A.15). Here, social workers are wanted, but with the massive numbers of newly arrived immigrants, the system is straining to provide for their needs. Alternately, overwhelmed and overworked social workers are also part of the problem when people do not receive the help they need. An April 8, 2015 article gives the history of interactions between police, adult protective services, neighbors, and an elderly couple leading up to the murder-suicide of a 100 year-old man and his 88 year-old wife, “deficits in care have been accentuated in recent years by fraying social services” said Maria Aberasturi, the social work supervisor at Bergen County Adult Protective Services (Schweber & Mueller, 2015, p. A.21). Here social services and resources to help are seen as inadequate to meet demand and need of the community. Later in the article Ms. Aberasturi is quoted again as saying “You can’t

prevent every tragedy, but if the systems were different, could this have turned out differently?” (Schweber & Mueller, 2015, p. A.21).

When systems are overworked and understaffed, the consequences can be serious for both those needing assistance and those charged with working to fill those needs. After the murder of a young social worker in a group home by one of the residents, officials question the way budget cuts may have contributed to the death. The article talks about hospital and community clinics closed and lack of funding to keep existing facilities fully staffed. It also outlines how the low-wages for mental health workers are a detriment to finding qualified practitioners,

Providers have trouble finding psychiatrists and other clinicians who are willing to work in the community; they depend on recent social work graduates, who usually move on quickly to better-paying jobs at hospitals or in private practice. (Sontag, 2011, p. A.1) Social workers are presented as less desirable than psychiatrists and clinicians, but are willing to work for less and so are used to fill positions others will not take. However, it should be noted that even the social workers move on from working in these settings for higher wage positions.

### **The Politics of Emotion**

Although less prevalent than other types of stories, murders and non-accidental child deaths were the subject of 12 articles. When combined with articles on Medicaid fraud and forced sterilizations, the total number of articles that contain moral outrage leading to discussion of new or changed laws is 14. In the case of non-accidental child deaths the emotional reaction is clear,

“We lost a child in such a horrible manner,” Mr. de Blassio said Friday. “Every parent in this city feels as I do,” he added. “It is very, very painful to know that this child went

through such agony, that a child was lost that we believe there was more than one opportunity to save” (McKinley, 2014b, p. A.17).

The same article outlines the policy changes Mayor de Blassio plans to make in the way social workers and the criminal justice system communicate as a direct result of this child death (McKinley, 2014b). An earlier article about another non-accidental child death also highlighted the outrage directed at the social workers,

Baby Marchella might be alive today, “Mr. Hynes said, “had these A.C.S. workers attended to her case with the basic levels of care it deserved, or had her grandmother stepped in and put a stop to the shocking abuse she is charged with facilitating” (Secret, 2011, p. A.1).

Both the social worker and his supervisor were charged with criminally negligent homicide for their roles in the death. Citing that the workers should have noticed the abuse, falsified records, and performed inadequate home visits which contributed to the environment in which the child was abused and died (Secret, 2011).

Non-accidental child deaths in South Carolina result in a similar outrage and search for ways to prevent any more deaths,

The state has already begun a legislative audit of the child protective division of the State Department of Social Services, ordered by lawmakers after reports surfaced that children in state care had been starved to death, were not getting proper medical care or, in at least one case, were placed back into a home where the child suffered more sexual abuse.

“We’ve had way too many dead children lately,” said State Representative Jenny Anderson Home. (Severson, 2013, p. A.22)

As in the New York City case, the investigation and any recommendations to change the way children are protected may take cues from the reaction to the cases outlined in the article.

Similarly, the murder of a 25 year-old social worker in Massachusetts by a mentally ill man, identified as a 27 year-old with schizophrenia and a history of interactions with the criminal justice and mental health systems in the state but allowed to live in a group home raises a similar response,

They had been alone at the Revere home, where, her family said, Ms. Moulton generally worked a solo shift. Mr. Chappell beat her, stabbed her repeatedly and then dumped her partially nude body in a church parking lot... The killing on Jan. 20 stunned the mental health care community in Massachusetts. The “shattering event” as one former state mental health official called it...” (Sontag, 2011, p. A.1)

The article goes on to cite state budget cuts to mental healthcare and question Ms. Moulton was alone in the group home with the man who murdered her. Here, the idea that the system failed both the victim and the mentally ill man believed to have murdered her. This statement outlines one of the economic reasons which may have led to the murder. A former state director for the Department of Mental Health is quoted in the article as saying, “will this case be the canary in the coal mine? Will it signal that we’ve gone too far in reducing client-staff ratios, in closing hospitals, in pushing independence for people who may still be too sick?” (Sontag, 2011, p. A.1). This statement is an emotional plea for changes in the mental health system directly related to this murder. In this way, the social worker who was murdered was a victim of budget cuts, in addition to the violent mental illness of the man who murdered her, touching on multiple stereotypes.

The counter to these articles is also present in an article which describes research on the child protection system that finds it ineffective at preventing future abuse. The article describes child protection investigations as an acute method for addressing abuse. In order to prevent future instances, better interventions are needed that can address the needs of children over time.

“I don’t see investigation as an intervention, I see it as an activity to gather information, said Jill Duerr Berrick, a professor of social welfare and the University of California, Berkeley. “While we might all hope that C.P.S. could do more, in the current context it doesn’t...” (Bakalar, 2010, p. D.3).

This statement outlines the difference between emotional reaction and moral outrage to an incident, and pragmatic research into the effectiveness of a system or agency.

### **Newsworthiness**

One of the trends in the articles seemed to be what types of stories were reported. The largest numbers of articles, 15, were related to the *New York Times* Neediest Cases Fund. Each of these articles stated that a social worker helped access services or funds for an individual or family in need. The articles also end with information on how to donate to the fund, outlining where to send checks and what other organizations are supported through the fund (Lipinski, 2012). The articles appear to be part news, part advertisement for donations to the fund which bears the *New York Times*’ name.

A total of six articles were about non-accidental child deaths, four were about murders. One of these was included in both categories as it involved the murder of both the mother and children in a family, followed by the suicide of the woman’s father (Alvarez & Robles, 2014). Other articles focused on specific issues like natural disasters or populations like immigrants.

Only four articles were about the social workers as a profile of the worker and their job. One of these articles outlined the charges against two child welfare workers, one of which was identified as a social worker, but also falls details the non-accidental death of a child which led to the charges. Social workers were not the focus of the majority of the articles, but were included as providers of information or background, expert opinion, or as part of a system or agency.

## **Discussion**

### **Summary of Findings**

Several major themes appear throughout the findings of this study that parallel the existing literature on social workers portrayed in the news. In studying news articles from the *New York Times*, this study sought to find how social workers are portrayed. Several themes about the social workers featured in the articles analyzed for this study found themes that pertained to how social workers are defined, what roles they play, and what stereotypes are present in describing social workers and the jobs they perform. Additionally, social workers appear in articles in which the politics of emotion are demonstrated by moral outrage and attempts at changing policies in direct response to a tragic event, as seen in the literature surrounding non-accidental child deaths. Finally, the findings of this study also demonstrate how social workers are seldom the subject of news articles, but provide supporting information to further the story.

### **Defining Social Workers**

Defining who is a social worker in these stories is a nebulous task. Although the criteria for inclusion utilized the specific terms “social worker” or “social workers,” few articles gave further qualifications for why a person was given this title. Education in social work or licensure as a social worker is seldom mentioned in the articles used for this study as a means for defining

social workers. This is further complicated by the interchangeable use of multiple titles within the same article for the same social worker, or groups of social workers.

Despite the fact that NASW states that “a bachelor’s degree is necessary for entry into the field” (NASW, 2011), the NASW Center for Workforce Studies (2006) finds that there is need for clarification because the term social worker is often used as a generic title for those providing social assistance in any setting. States also vary in their licensure requirements and in the titles used to designate various levels of licensure (Association of Social Work Boards, 2013b). This variation also applies to whether or not states have title laws protecting the use of social worker as a term reserved for those who meet specific educational or licensing criteria. In states without title protection self-identifying as a social worker is not restricted, only the specific use of licensed social worker (Clark, 2003). Without clarifying educational background or licensure attained to practice social work, many of the articles leave open to speculation how the term is defined. The use of “social worker” in the news can be a self-identifying term or one ascribed to a person performing a job associated with social work.

### **Roles**

In searching to further define who is considered a social worker, several roles were identified in the *New York Times*, including those of navigator and helper, expert and collaborator, and various other roles that pertained to the tasks being accomplished by the social worker. These roles most directly related to the work being done by the social worker and often overlapped with each other. The most common role was that of navigator and helper, a person who helps to attain goods, services, or money for clients. This role is also closely related to the idea of social workers as caregivers and providers. However, in the news discourse, the role of navigator and helper often also included that of gatekeeper. Much like the historical influences

of early social work balancing social care and social control, the social workers in these stories serve as both an access point to services or benefits, and the person responsible for determining if all qualifications are met to receive those services. In these instances, the social worker is both giving support and aid while simultaneously exercising social control.

Social workers portrayed as experts are often quoted in articles as someone providing an opinion on a situation, or policy. They are also often grouped with other professionals, like doctors and nurses, or with other groups concerned with the wellbeing of a population, like the parents of children experiencing trauma. These roles also overlap with other roles, as social workers in Times Square seeking to end homelessness provide services in the area, and serve as researchers by tracking the homeless population and studying the most effective means for finding housing and supports to keep them off the streets, making them experts on the population (Bosman, 2010).

### **Stereotypes**

Several of the stereotypes found in the existing literature also appear in the articles analyzed for this study. These included the dichotomy of caring, nurturing, and empathetic social workers who served as caregivers, against the representation of cold and bureaucratic social workers who fulfilled the duties of their jobs without concern for their clients. These representations are also commonly used to describe women in the media. Stereotypes for women include those of nurturing mothers and aggressive businesswomen, closely mirroring the dichotomy found in these articles (Appiah, 2008). The same caring versus uncaring dynamic was found in a survey comparing news and entertainment media (Zugazaga et al., 2006). Again, this reinforces the idea that social workers are associated with both the control and care of their clients (Warner, 2013). It also illustrates the complex nature of trying to define social work.

Opposing ideas about the profession are present in the articles, sometimes describing the same person.

Social workers were often also seen as overworked and overwhelmed, or as working within systems that were not able to meet the needs of the populations they served. This was not something covered extensively in the literature, but did appear in multiple articles analyzed in this study. Much of the previous literature focused on specific roles or areas of practice, rather than whether or not social workers have large caseloads.

### **The Politics of Emotion**

In addition to defining social work, analysis of news articles for this study did find several stories in which the politics of emotion were evident. The cycle outlined in previous literature in which a tragic event is followed by a moral outrage that results in calls for, or changes to policies governing social service agencies and social workers also appears frequently in this study when the article is focused on the non-accidental death of a child. Parts of this same cycle were also present in an article about the murder of a social worker in which multiple questions are raised about how budget cuts to mental health services put the social worker at risk (Sontag, 2011). Two articles on attempts to atone for North Carolina's eugenics policy also contain the moral outrage component and resulted in an official apology from the state and attempts to pass legislation that would provide compensation to survivors of the program (Severson, 2011; Severson, 2012). The politics of emotion can be applied beyond the scope of non-accidental child deaths which were the focus of previous literature (Chenot, 2011; Kearney, 2013; Warner, 2013). But the articles used in this study do find that a social worker exercising social control, like child protection or the enforcement of eugenics policies are closely associated with the politics of emotion reaction. This is congruent with what Reid and Misener (2001)

stated about the association between roles social workers play and how positively or negatively that social worker is portrayed.

### **Newsworthiness**

Social workers were seldom the subject of news articles in this study. Most often, social workers are quoted or described in order to further the story of a client, system, or event. Only four total articles profiled social workers and gave detailed descriptions of their jobs, duties, responsibilities, and the population they serve. More often, social workers are described by the agency they work for or the specific duties of their job. Social workers most often serve as part of a larger story as part of the background and not the focus of the article. The use of social workers as information sources does give some agency to the social workers as helping to give language and context for framing a story. Pan (2008) asserts that by providing these tools, the information source does shape the frame used in a story. However, as stated in study on the public perception of social work “we often seem to gently blend into the background, not attracting too much attention” (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). This perception seems to be reflected in the use of social workers in articles as part of the story, but not the subject.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice**

Clients of social workers and the general public have access to the news stories used for this study. However, social workers may have a clearer understanding of the history, professional standards, and practice of social work than the general public. Defining social work is difficult as the profession is broad and encompasses various levels of education and areas of practice (NASW, 2006). By using interchangeable titles and terms for social workers and the tasks they do, the articles used in this study further muddy the definition. The lack of clarity in defining social work is reflected in the articles analyzed for this study and so the responsibility of

helping prospective clients, peers, and policy makers understand the work that social workers do falls to practitioners. Social workers may better understand the educational requirements and have fulfilled the requirements to receive a license that corresponds to their education, experience, and area of practice, but these designations may not be clear to those outside the profession (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Zugazaga et al., 2006).

### **Implications for the Profession**

There is some consensus in the previous literature that social workers should be more active in furthering public understanding of the profession (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Zugazaga, 2006). However, it is unclear whether or not a better understanding of the profession by the general public or politicians would be beneficial to social workers or their clients (Warner, 2013). Much of the previous literature focused on the positive or negative nature of how social workers were portrayed in news stories, but what appears absent in this study is a clear definition of social work. This may also mean that there is a lack of understanding as to who social workers serve and how.

### **Implications for Social Work Policy**

The cycle of policy change based on emotional reactions to a tragic event is an example of how news stories can impact policies that govern social workers and their clients. When events like non-accidental child deaths and murders occur, the attention given to the event can be helpful in pointing to areas that can be strengthened to ensure that these tragedies are less likely to reoccur. However, there is also the potential for these decisions to be ineffective. Social workers should advocate for policies that address problems in systems, but are not based on unrealistic ideas about eliminating risk entirely, and emphasize those policies that prevent child maltreatment. Because social workers serve as both helper and gatekeeper for many systems,

they have a unique perspective which should be included in the efforts to address policy changes to social services.

Additionally, consideration of how the variation in policy regarding the use of the term social worker and the wide range of requirements for licensure may contribute to the confusion about who is a social worker in news articles. Considerations for policy changes may include enacting title protection uniformly across states to clarify the use of social worker as a way to specifically designate those with education in social work. The interchangeable labels found in this study point to confusion over how social workers are identified.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

Because little previous literature exists, and the most recent study of social workers in the news is nine years old, this study serves to fill a gap in information. Grounded theory data analysis method lends itself well to exploratory type research, and is rigorous in that it moves from the text carefully to more abstract themes. By utilizing an open coding system to analyze the text, themes were developed beyond classification of positive or negative portrayal. Themes were developed that illustrated the complicated task of defining social workers in news stories and understanding their roles. The analysis also found connections to previous research, which outline the cycle involved in the politics of emotion, and talk about the connection between social workers and their client through stereotypes and dependency.

While some connection to previous research was made, this study was not exhaustive and used specific search terms and only one newspaper as a source of material for analysis. The researcher is also inexperienced, and the project was time-limited. By analyzing the words used in newspaper articles, the study can state what information is available, but cannot account for how readers interpret the articles for themselves. Influence on the general public cannot be

determined without studying their reactions in addition to the news items. It should also be noted that grounded theory can also be error prone when used by those who are inexperienced, and may be limited by assumptions developed in reviewing literature prior to data analysis (El Hussein, Hirst, Slayers, & Osuji, 2014). The study also does not answer questions of why the themes identified are prevalent.

### **Implications for Social Work Research**

This study was not exhaustive, and a comparison of articles from multiple sources may yield richer results. Studying social work representations across media including both news and entertainment media may also give a more complete picture of how social workers are portrayed. By focusing on the language used in portraying social workers in the *New York Times*, this study was able to find themes in the way social workers are described, the roles they play, and the types of articles in which they appear. However, this study does not provide insight into how these portrayals effect the way people understand the practice of social work or identify who social workers are. Further research into how people interpret the portrayal of social workers would provide an additional level of understanding that could further the work of social work organizations seeking to educate the public on the profession.

Some questions raised in the process of analyzing the articles for this study include why social work remains vaguely defined and how the representations of social workers relate to class, gender, and social structures. There also remains a lack of explanation as to why attention is given to tragic events or failures of social workers or social services. Finding answers to these questions may provide insight as to how social workers can better represent the profession in the news.

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**Appendix A: News Articles Used for Analysis**

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An additional 10 articles were analyzed in the course of this study, but not cited in the writing of this paper.