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

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of
Master of Social Work
at Massey University, Manawatū,
New Zealand.

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2018

ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I could not have completed this thesis without the help and support of many others. You have all brought your own unique skills, expertise and qualities to the project and your contributions are greatly appreciated.

First and foremost, to my wonderful partner Anna and beautiful young daughter Bailee, thank you for your love and support, and for your tolerance of the many hours I have spent in front of a computer. I look forward to making up for it and spending much playful and joyful time with you both!

To my supervisors Dr Kathryn Hay and Dr Tracie Mafileo, I am immensely grateful for your wisdom, support, encouragement and patience as I have undertaken this journey. I have enjoyed our many conversations and learned much from you both. Your guidance and your relentless efforts to help me remain focused have much improved this thesis.

To my friends and colleagues at Oranga Tamariki, especially my manager Sandra Coleman, thank you for working around the many day's leave I needed to take nearer the completion of this thesis. I hope the insights from this work will help us all better support our colleagues and the children and young people we are there for.

To Katheryn Margaret Pascoe, thank you for your assistance in providing quality assurance for the content analysis, and to Anna Costley, I am lucky and grateful for your expert proofing skills.

I would like to thank the many professional bodies who helped reach participants, and all those professionals who took the time to respond to the questionnaire. This research would not exist without your contributions. I would also like to acknowledge those of you who took the time to contact me directly or assisted by forwarding on the invitation to participate to professional colleagues.

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

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

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