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Social Workers' Experiences of Public Perceptions of the Social Work Profession: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract

Public perceptions play a crucial role in shaping the image of any profession, and social work is no exception. It is widely assumed that adverse public views of social work can negatively impact the legitimacy of social services and the well-being of social workers—ultimately threatening efficiency and retention. Yet, empirical studies addressing these assumptions are rare. The current study investigates social workers' experiences of public perceptions of the social work profession and key factors contributing to public views. Focus groups with Swedish social workers were conducted, and data were analysed via qualitative content analysis. The dirty work framework was applied in interpreting the findings. The analysis revealed that adverse public views are experienced as prevalent and that organisational structures, legislation, and social work practice contribute to such views. However, media portrayals are seen as the most influential factor in establishing adverse public views. Based on the social workers' experiences, it is concluded that the social services in Sweden can be understood as socially and morally tainted, but that levels of taint differ between social services areas, and efforts to reduce such taint are discussed.

Keywords

social work, public perceptions, public views, child welfare, dirty work

Introduction

Social work professionals have long been concerned with how they are perceived in the broader public sphere. Both practitioners and scholars argue that poor understanding of the social work profession and prejudices toward social workers constitute risks for legitimacy, efficiency of social interventions, and the well-being of social workers (Argüello et al., 2018; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004). Moreover, studies indicate that negative public perceptions of specific occupational areas, tasks, and professionals are significant factors in the development of occupational stigma, which can impede professionals' self-affirmation and the formation of positive occupational identities (Baran et al., 2012; Kreiner et al., 2006; Soral et al., 2022). Yet, research on public views of social work(ers) is scarce, especially from the perspective of those they concern, social workers. Hence, this article reports on a qualitative study of how social workers delineate the public and experience public perceptions of the social work profession. Additionally, emphasis is placed on how these experiences may be interpreted and understood from stigma-related perspectives.

The Public and the Social Services

Efforts to understanding public perceptions of the Swedish social services requires contextualization in relation to policy and underpinning principles regarding organization and provision of services. In line with international social welfare policies emphasizing democracy and solidarity (see e.g., National Association of Social Workers, 2021), the Swedish Social Services Act (SoL) posits that the mission of the social services is to promote economic and social security, equal living conditions, and active participation in social life for all (SFS, 2001, 453). Most likely, the term pertains to "the public," which is often used interchangeably with "everyone in a society" or "citizens" (Carrigan & Fatsis, 2021). However, who or what constitutes "all" is not further

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elaborated in the legislative framework. Nevertheless, given the legislative framing, the public represents a key stakeholder for the social services. For the social services in general, and social workers in particular, maintaining a positive image and good relations with the surrounding society (i.e., the public) is central for the establishment of legitimacy and trust.

Negative public perceptions, on the other hand, can have a negative impact on social work practice, the working environment of social workers, and the effectiveness of social interventions (Staniforth et al., 2016). Ultimately, this also affects people in need of social support, for example by negatively impacting their willingness to apply for help. Furthermore, given that individuals' professional affiliation, and how this is perceived by others, is important for shaping identity, it is likely that derogatory views also affect social workers' sense of self in a negative way (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Cooley, 1983; Kreiner et al., 2006; Shaffer, 2005; Yeung & Martin, 2003). This applies to both individual responses and narratives in public forums such as media and social media can (Ayre, 2001; Briar-Lawson et al., 2011). Negative narratives can raise questions about the credibility of social workers as providers of social support (cf. Blomberg, 2019). This is currently apparent for Swedish social workers, as Swedish social authorities since 2022 have been exposed to a disinformation campaign on social media alleging systematic abuse of mainly Muslim families, including child abduction. Given Sweden's status as a multicultural society and a Nordic welfare state committed to principles of equality and equal treatment, it is possible that this campaign has caused people to doubt these principles and that it has negatively influenced public perceptions of social services, at least among certain segments of the population. While a comprehensive analysis of the disinformation campaign's potential consequences on Swedish social work is still pending, initial assessments indicate that it has been largely fueled by individuals and groups aiming to undermine public views and trust in Swedish public administration, especially the social services (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023). Although the allegations made in the campaign lack substantiation, they have nonetheless affected social services and their employees in various ways. There are reports of threats directed at social services and individual social workers, alongside instances where social workers have been harassed and publicly shamed online (Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023).

Selective Social Welfare Services in the Eyes of the Public

Within the Swedish universal welfare system, such as health care and education, services are available to all citizens. In contrast, access to social services is selective, that is, granted based on assessment of need, which may influence how these services are perceived by the public. For example, research suggests that public trust and perceived legitimacy are lower for selective welfare services compared to the universal (Rothstein, 2003; Rothstein & Uslaner, 2005). According to Rothstein (2003), this is due to the selection process in itself—individuals are categorized as either having access (those in need/recipients) or not. This, in turn, might contribute to suspicions about the worthiness of recipients as well as the professional practice of eligibility assessment, both of which could be potential sources for occupational stigma (cf. Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014). Furthermore, the eligibility process is inherently uncertain. Claimants may withhold information or provide false information, and case workers may differ in their interpretations of information as well as guidelines for decision making. Consequently, there is a risk, as Lipsky (1980/2010) puts it, that the civil servant's decision-making process will be suspected of being based on "bias, stereotyping, and ignorance" (p. 69). Rothstein (2003) further argues that case workers' decisions may be perceived by the public as arbitrary, discriminatory, and based on misinformation, ultimately raising questions about the credibility of the organization and its staff. This, and the fact that selective welfare services, in general, are poorly understood by the public, puts the social services and social workers at a disadvantage in terms of public perception and the potential for stigmatization (cf. Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Soral et al., 2022; Svallfors, 1996).

Public Perceptions of the Social Services

Research on public perceptions of social work and social workers has typically focused on public knowledge and indicates low levels of awareness and knowledge as well as variation across counties (see e.g., Amadsun, 2020; Beddoe et al., 2019; Kagan 2016; McCulloch & Webb, 2020). Studies also show that the public primarily understands social work as child protection (Argüello et al., 2018) and as a profession with poor working conditions (Bolgün & Sahin, 2019; Staniforth et al., 2014). With regard to public trust, Swedish and Scottish studies show that trust in social workers is relatively high (Nilsson & Landstedt, 2022; Nilsson et al., 2024; McCulloch & Webb, 2020). However, public trust in social services as a welfare institution seems low, especially in relation to other welfare services such as health care (Nilsson & Landstedt, 2022; Nilsson et al., 2024).

Media have been highlighted as having a particularly important role in shaping public perceptions. Some research indicates that social work in general, and child welfare services in particular, is highly exposed to media scrutiny, often in sensationalist and unfair ways (see e.g.,

Blomberg, 2019; Brunnberg, 2001; Gaughan & Garrett, 2012; Lundström & Andersson, 2004). Scholars argue that media reports are predominately negative, which leads to public fear, mistrust, and blame toward case workers in child welfare (Ayre, 2001). This, in turn, can make the work of child protection exceptionally difficult—endangering the well-being of both social workers and those they serve (Briar-Lawson et al., 2011). However, other studies identified nearly non-existent media coverage (Cordoba, 2017) as well as relatively positive representations (Reid & Misener, 2003). Although limited, some research also suggests that individuals' knowledge of social work and demographic factors may influence perceptions (Nilsson & Landstedt, 2022; Nilsson et al., 2024; Kagan, 2016).

Social Services as Dirty Work?

It is often argued that social services clients are perceived as "outsiders" (Dahlstedt & Lalander, 2018), and that they are subjected to varying degrees of stigma (Frost et al., 2020; Payne, 1980; Wacquant, 2009). This introduces an additional aspect in terms of public perceptions of social services and social workers, namely, that of an organization and a workforce that is responsible for providing help to those whom others may consider to be incorrigible, unworthy, and best avoided. Originally elaborated by Hughes (1951), the work assigned to occupations that, for this reason, can be perceived as unpleasant or discrediting can be referred to as "dirty work." Workers in these occupations risk stigmatization due to the dirty nature of the tasks they perform. Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, 2014) suggest that "dirt" can be associated with certain occupations and groups of workers who are perceived to be physically, socially, or morally tainted (see also. Baran et al., 2012; Hughes, 1958; Riviera, 2015; Simpson & Simpson, 2018). Hence, dirty work can involve literal dirt, as in the case of refuse collectors, butchers, or chimney sweeps, as well as socially or morally defined dirt. Social taint refers to occupations involving regular contact with individuals or groups perceived as stigmatized. This stigma is also projected onto the workers through association. This process is similar to what Goffman (1963) describes as "courtesy stigma," where individuals are stigmatized merely based on their close connections with stigmatized individuals. Morally tainted occupations are those in which workers use methods that are, for example, fraudulent, intrusive, confrontational, or otherwise in breach of civil norms. Within the dirty work framework, and in this study, the dimensions of "taint" are thus understood as domains that constitute potential sources of stigma. Importantly, physical, social, and moral taint are not mutually exclusive, and the boundaries between them are often blurred (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth & Kreiner, 2014; Soral et al., 2022).

The few existing international studies of how social workers experience public perceptions of social services and social workers suggest that the social work profession includes some characteristics of dirty work. For example, one study found that social workers feel stigmatised due to negative public perceptions (Beddoe et al., 2019) and are often 'vilified' when things go wrong (Legood et al., 2016). Another found that social workers felt that the public believed the only role of child welfare workers was to remove children from their parents (Staniforth et al., 2021). On the other hand, research has also shown that public perceptions of the social work profession are not as bad as social workers tend to think (Hobbs & Evans, 2017; Staniforth et al., 2016). Clearly, more research is needed on this matter.

The Present Study

Despite arguments about the significance of public perceptions of selective welfare services in relation to trust and legitimacy, empirical research on public perceptions of social services and how social workers experience these perceptions is scarce (cf. Reid & Misener, 2003). This particularly applies to the Swedish context. The present study addresses this knowledge gap by exploring how social workers employed in public social services understand the notion of "the public" and how they experience public perceptions of the social work profession as well as key factors influencing such perceptions. These understandings and experiences are interpreted in relation to the moral and social taint associated with "dirty work."

Method

Given that focus groups are particularly pertinent for research on underexplored subjects (Morgan, 1996), which is the case here, focus groups were conducted between January and March 2023 with social workers employed in the Swedish social services. Participants were recruited using a strategic sampling approach (Creswell, 2014; Mason, 2002). Managers of the social services in different municipalities in different regions of Sweden were contacted. Those who were interested in participating provided us with contact information for employed social workers. We contacted the social workers and sent them an information sheet to ensure their informed consent. It is important to also clarify that while the term "social worker" is not a licensed profession in Sweden, the term primarily denotes caseworkers employed by the public social services agency, which applies to the participants in this study.

Participants

A total of six focus groups in different municipalities were conducted, with three to six social workers from the same social services agency participating in each group. Only one group had three participants. The focus groups were composed of social workers employed in different units of social services individual and family care. A typical group consisted of one or two people working with child welfare, one or two with addiction treatment, and one or two with financial assistance. Exercising authority was part of the job description for all participants. The social workers worked in six different municipalities, with populations ranging from about 3,000 to 160,000, in four different geographical regions of Sweden. In total, 27 social workers participated, with work experience ranging from one to forty years and a mean of 9 years. All child welfare social workers held a bachelor's degree in social work, while a few in the other areas had degrees in related fields. Only a two of the participants were men.

Procedure

Two members of the research team facilitated the focus groups; one moderated (Morgan, 1996) and one took notes and asked occasional follow-up questions. The first author attended and moderated all six groups. The group sessions lasted approximately 90 min; they were audio-recorded and took place in a quiet and private area at the participants' place of work. Before the discussion began, the information on the information sheet was repeated verbally and time was given for questions. Participants were also asked to sign a written consent form, and it was reiterated that participation was voluntary, and that consent could be withdrawn at any time.

A semi-structured thematic interview guide (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2014) was used during the focus group sessions to ensure that all topics of interest were covered. However, emphasis was placed on free discussion between the participants rather than on answering specific questions posed by the moderator. The interview guide and themes were developed in collaboration with social workers during pilot interviews that preceded the current study. After completion, the focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim by the first author. Rather than transcribing each focus group as a unit, it was noted who said what. This allowed comparisons to be made between participants and to see where there was consensus and/or disagreement. To avoid confusing participants, the recorded material was transcribed immediately after each focus group, while their voices were still fresh in memory. A seating chart was also created to help distinguish them. Additionally, participants introduced themselves and shared their professional backgrounds in a clockwise manner, making it possible to match their voices to the seating chart during transcription. After completing the transcription, the audio file was listened to again to check for any errors.

The study was ethically reviewed and was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority before data collection began (diary number: 2022-03504-01). To ensure the anonymity of the participants, names and locations were given pseudonyms in the transcriptions.

Analysis

An exploratory content analysis performed in NVivo (version 14) was used to analyze the data (see Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Lindgren et al., 2020). The first step in the analysis was to locate meaning-bearing units in the material that related to the aim, and to postulate research questions. In the second step, the meaning units were condensed so that the essence of the unit was highlighted. The condensed units of meaning were then coded. The codes were created inductively, and condensed units that referred to similar topics were sorted into the same code. If a condensed unit was multifaceted and could refer to more than one code, it was double coded. Codes were then grouped into subcategories, which were in turn sorted into categories. Figure 1, below, exemplifies the analytical process.

Throughout the analysis, the level of interpretation and abstraction increased. The approach is similar to what Lindgren et al. (2020, p. 2) describe as decontextualization and recontextualization. The former refers to breaking data into pieces, while the latter pertains to combining these pieces into new patterns that inform the aim of the study (cf. Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). Figure 2 below illustrates the later stage of this process and shows the subcategories included within the main categories.

Findings

The two main categories—*The public and the hegemony of prejudice* and *Dialectical dynamics: Key factors shaping public perceptions*—illustrate how social workers define, experience, and understand what contributes to public perceptions of the social work profession.

The Public and the Hegemony of Prejudice

This category concerns how the social workers understand the notion of 'the public' and, relatedly, their experiences of how the public perceives the social services and view them as social work professionals. Although the social workers were ambiguous when describing how the public can be understood, they all agreed that adverse

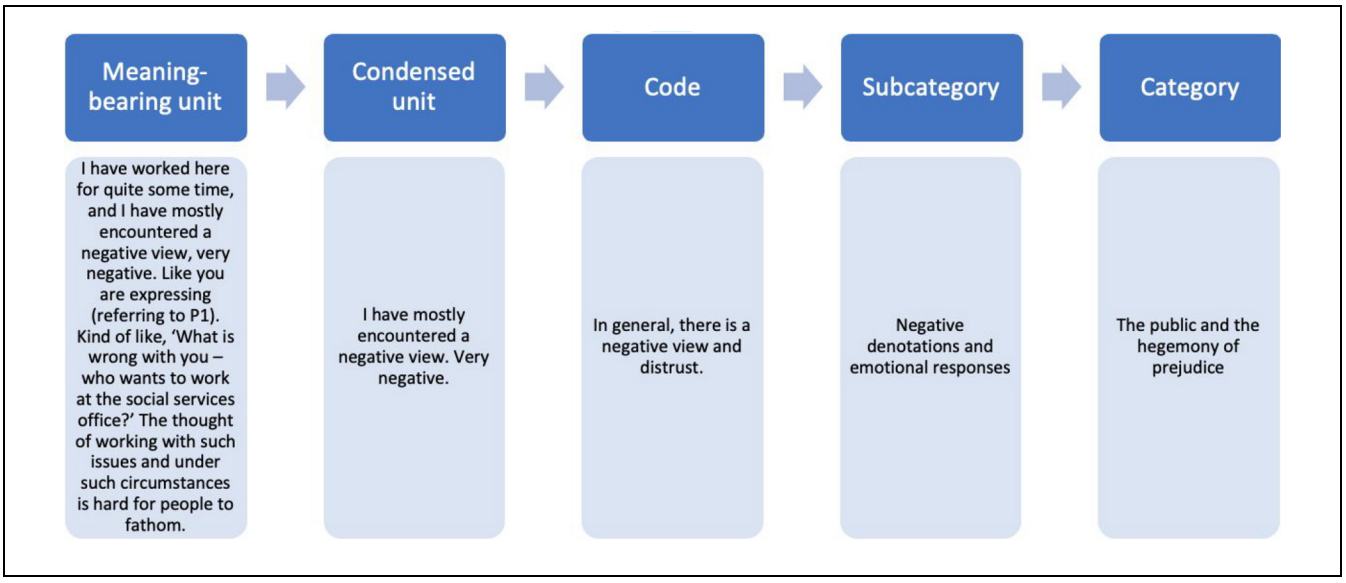

Figure 1. Example of the exploratory qualitative content analysis.

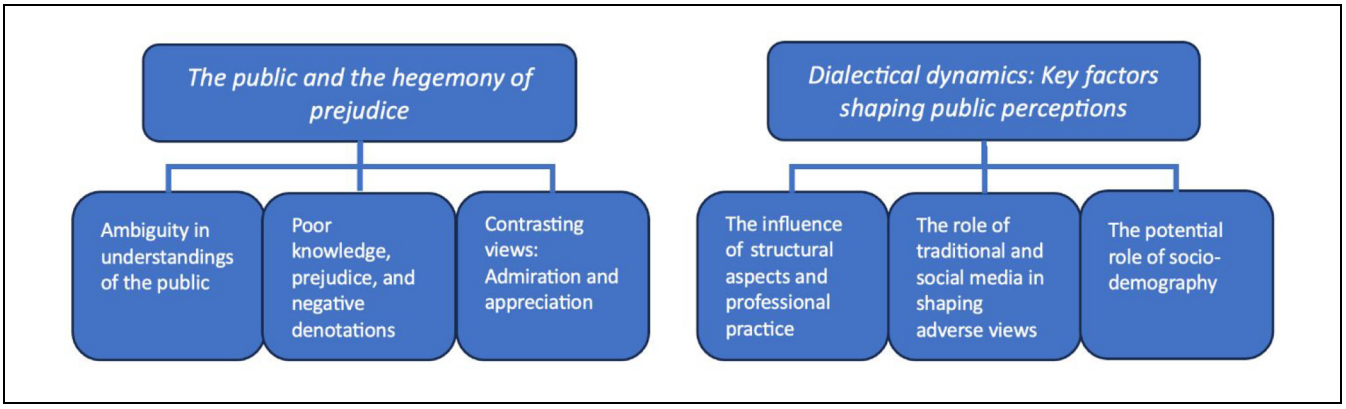

Figure 2. Main categories and sub categories.

views of social work(ers) were dominant within the public.

Ambiguity in Understandings of the Public. The participants understood "the public" as anyone and everyone—from the person you meet in the supermarket or on the street to citizens more generally. However, the public was also contextualized, particularly in relation to personal or professional relationships/interactions. This was especially apparent regarding friends and family, whom the social workers expected to have greater knowledge and understanding their work. Also, the public was differentiated in relation to contact with the social services.

P1: For me it is bound to context. I mean, when we sit here [in the social services office] and talk about it, the public becomes those who do not come in contact with us. Anytime or in any way. That is the public for me. However, if I were in another context I would answer differently.

P2: I'm thinking exactly the same. It depends on the context. But in general, if someone asks me and I don't have to think about context, I would answer "everyone." But when we discuss the term in a work-related context it is different. (FG 4)

Clients, when in contact with social workers, were described as a group with specific needs rather than as members of the public. Similarly, while active in their professional role, the social workers did not see themselves as part of the public but rather as representatives of society.

Poor Knowledge, Prejudice, and Negative Denotations. The social workers felt that the public's perception of them and of the social services in general was characterized by limited knowledge and assumptions of social work practice being mentally burdensome. They saw this lack of knowledge and understanding as part of the reason for negative public perceptions. Without knowing all aspects of the work, both positive and negative, or knowing that social workers' obligations vary greatly depending on their area of social work, individuals' intuitive thoughts about the profession focused mainly on its burdensome aspects. Often, these thoughts were also the first ones that people verbalized when the social workers discussed their occupation with members of the public.

P1: I think, if we are talking about the public as everyone that does not work here, that they do not have the slightest clue about what we do, what we work with (rest of group expresses agreement) […] I think that it contributes to a negative view of the social services, or that the word has a negative denotation. When I tell people where I work, they usually say "Oh, that is tough" or "Oh, that must be very heavy and stressful." It is these kinds of negative statements, never "Oh it must be very rewarding to be able to help people." That's my experience anyway.

P2: Mine too.

P3: I agree. (FG 1)

Although the social workers asserted that public knowledge about the social work profession was low, they also expressed that they understood this lack of knowledge. The social work profession is in many ways "hidden" as client confidentiality limits transparency and social workers' freedom to talk about their work. Moreover, the many rules, laws, and guidelines that regulate the social work profession are difficult for those outside the profession to know and understand. Nevertheless, the public's lack of knowledge and the perceived difficulty of being transparent were perceived as troublesome. Particularly pronounced in relation to this was that lack of knowledge contributed to prejudices and negative connotations of social services. According to the participants, the public believes that social services are limited to helping only certain groups in society, primarily people who are poor as well as neglected children, and that it is shameful to seek help. The social workers also argued that the public perceives the social services as a 'last resort' – that it is only when there are no other alternatives that contact with social services is a viable option. In all other cases, the social services are best avoided. Several reasons for this were identified, but shame and stigma, rumors, and social services' ability to use coercive measures were seen as prominent. This was particularly pronounced in relation to child welfare.

P1: I think that many parents feel that it is a failure to contact and ask the social services for help. That once you do, you have failed as a parent […] It is usually a strong feeling of failure.

P2: I agree, but also the attitude that 'I know who needs help from the social services and I am not one of them' […] some are also extremely particular about not revealing to anyone that they are in contact with us.

P3: Yes, the feeling that you have failed as a parent. Many that we meet talk and think like that. (FG 6)

Overall, social workers perceived that the narrative of social workers taking children away from their parents is widespread in the public. Even though, in reality, coercive measures are always a last resort and decisions to remove children from their birth parents are made by the administrative court, such facts were not part of that narrative, according to the participants. Instead, the public seemed to believe that the social workers could make decisions about removal on their own and that this is the most common intervention.

P1: I mean all these opinions that "the only thing the social services do is to apprehend kids, it is enough to look at your child the wrong way and that will happen (rest of group expresses agreement)."

P2: I often experience, when someone comes here for the first time, that it is like that. A belief that "Are you going to take my kid now?" That removal of kids is what the social services stands for. (FG 3)

However, some ambiguity emerged in relation to the use of coercive measures. The participants expressed that, on the one hand, people think that the social services use coercive measures too extensively, and, on the other hand, that coercive measures are not used enough.

P1: When it comes to relatives of substance abusers, they can get very frustrated. Kind of like "why don't you do anything? Why don't the social services do anything?"

P2: In our setting it is exactly the opposite, like "Why do you do so much?" It's kind of reversed roles like "You use LVU all the time, you just take kids away whenever you want."

P3: Kidnap them.

P2: Yes, but it doesn't work that way. (FG 2)

It was also emphasized that some people think that social workers can fix everything. That they can simply "wave their magic wand" and all issues will be resolved. As one of the participants put it, *"I believe that there are also too-high expectations of us sometimes, that we can perform magic, like 'why don't you fix this, why don't you solve this problem for this person?" (P1/FG 5)*. Usually, such misconceptions were caused by a failure to understand that those who need help must put time and effort

into helping themselves in order for their issues to be solved. In addition, the participants expressed that they were labelled with derogatory epithets and stereotypical characteristics because of their profession. Examples included being called "baby snatchers" and "social justice warriors" and being seen as cold-hearted.

P3: I recognise myself as well; there have been many times when I've been talking to someone and got the feeling of "What kind of person am I? I must be made of stone' when someone says 'I could never manage to be a social worker […] Oh no, I could never sit with a small child…". I guess it is sensitive for people, especially with children, when they are subjected to harm when they are little.

P1: I recognise that as well…

P3: Indeed. (FG 4)

Linked to this were experiences of people tending to believe that social workers are always working and making assessments, including in their private lives. Consequently, people would adjust their behavior or talk (or not talk) about certain things in their presence. For example, participants described how people would ask for advice about social issues in their own lives or in relation to people close to them. This experience of lack of boundaries also implied that some people might feel threatened by social workers, even if they were "off the clock": *'It's like they start thinking [when realizing that a social worker is present] "Okay, now we have to think about how we are and how we behave, and to the kids: do not fight now please"' (P1/FG 2)*. Another prejudice participants experienced concerned distrust toward social workers in terms of competence and ability to provide help. Some participants even explained that they had encountered views that the only thing social services and social workers do is destroy people's lives.

P3: Well, he told me a long story, which I was not prepared for […] he went on and on about how worthless the social services are and that the only thing they do is destroy lives. Then he asked me what I do for a living. I hesitated, but I told him that I was a social worker. And he said, "No, you can't be!?" and I said, "Well, yes I am." The least I can say is that the rest of the evening got a bit stiff. (FG 3)

Contrasting Views: Admiration and Appreciation. Although lack of knowledge, prejudice, and negative views were perceived as typical public perceptions, the participants had also experienced appreciation and admiration from the public. This included being told that the work they do is important but burdensome and that others would not be able to do it. It also meant that people expressed to the social workers that it was impressive that they could manage to do the work, especially since it can be "risky" on a personal level to perform social work.

P2: Well, that we are kind of tough in light of the fact that we are able to do this…

P1: I think that those you talk to understand that the work is important but they also think […] that there are a lot of negative aspects included in the job but that it is good that someone wants to work for the social services.

P3: Also, that there can be personal risks included, like threats.

P1: Yes. (FG 1)

Here is where one of the greatest differences between the areas of social work was found. In general, child welfare social workers had heard statements of admiration more often than those working in the other areas. However, the main explanation for this admiration was that people viewed child welfare social work as the most difficult of all. This did not mean that the social workers in the other occupational branches were not admired, or disapproved of, but rather that it was more uncommon for them to encounter any of these views.

P4: I don't think that I have encountered that much negativity…

Interviewer: Have you encountered positive views?

P4: Well, no, not anything positive either (all of the participants burst out in laughter). I think it's like the others have already expressed, that "your job must be really tough and you must hear a lot of sad stories." People say things like that, but not that it is a bad thing to be a social worker. I've not encountered that. (FG 6)

While the social workers pointed out that (positive) public perceptions of the profession are crucial for legitimacy and effectiveness, some expressed indifference to public perceptions. However, such statements had in common that they concerned how much the social workers cared about how people view them on a personal level, not whether such views were important for the profession or professional practice. In relation to this, there was consensus on the importance of the public viewing social work(ers) as the helping force that, according to the social workers, it is supposed to be.

Dialectical Dynamics: Key Factors Shaping Public Perceptions

This second category incorporates the key factors shaping public views of the social services and social workers according to the participants. These factors can be separated into two categories: those that originate inside social work practice and those that do not. Inside social work practice refers here to factors that are specific to how the social services are arranged, governed, and practiced, while outside factors are those that are outside the

social services' control, for example, how the organization is described in public forums.

The Influence of Structural Aspects and Professional Practice. The social workers argued that public perceptions of the social services are influenced by legal and structural aspects such as what the social services are for, how they are governed, and how work is carried out within the organization. Coercive measures, which are chiefly regulated in the Swedish Care of Young Persons (Special Provisions) Act [LVU] (SFS, 1990, 52), were seen as particularly influential in this regard.

P1: I think that the legislation, I mean, we have legislation that gives us as an authority the possibility to apprehend children. I think that that is a crucial aspect. I mean, fear, worries, shame, it all revolves around that […] I believe that if we did not have LVU, it would be different.

P6: Not only LVU. SoL 11:1 as well, to initiate investigation, means that we have the authority to make the contacts we deem necessary. It is not possible to make an appeal against us initiating an investigation. (FG 4)

The participants also emphasized that invading people's privacy is inherent in their professional practice. They acknowledged that assessments that entail asking questions about highly personal and sensitive matters can be perceived as a violation of integrity and thereby contribute to the view that social services are best avoided.

P4: It involves such personal things. It is, I mean, our kids or how I use alcohol, it is extremely private, and it is these things we look into and assess. We get into the most sensitive things in people's lives. It's not like when you have a problem with your car and leave it to a mechanic.

P2: It's usually situations and aspects where people feel the most vulnerable.

P3: In a crisis…

P4: Yes.

P1: Yes, and it can be that it is viewed as a failure, from those we meet, to ask for help. That they feel like bad parents or that it is shameful in general. (FG 5)

Another structural aspect that social workers highlighted as important to public perceptions was the working environment and the workload. Many seem to know that working at the social services office is very stressful and emotionally tough, something that contributes to a view that the job is almost unimaginably difficult.

P1: Well, for the most part when I have told people where I work in the past, they have kind of expressed pity […] Like "Oh, that is tough" and "Oh my god!"

Interviewer: What about the rest of you?

P3: I have worked here for quite some time, and I have mostly encountered a negative view, very negative. Like you are expressing (referring to P1). Kind of like, "What is wrong with you—who wants to work at the social services office?" The thought of working with such issues and under such circumstances is hard for people to fathom. (FG 6)

In addition to organizational and structural issues, the importance of professional practice in shaping public perceptions was also highlighted. The social workers acknowledged that misconduct could lead to a bad impression of the profession. Relatedly, they also stressed that social services do not have a "spotless past" and that there are cases where things have gone wrong. It was also emphasized that an individual's previous contacts, if unsatisfactory, could have a negative impact on public views, not only for those involved, but also for others, as such things spread by word of mouth.

The Role of Traditional and Social Media in Shaping Adverse Views. Portrayals of the social services system and its workforce in traditional media were perceived as the single most important aspect influencing public perceptions of the social services. It was argued that the hostile media portrayals focusing on malpractice contributed greatly to adverse views. It was also emphasized that a lot of what is reported in media is incorrect or missing vital information. Moreover, the social workers experienced that media tend to report that social services either do too much (e.g., apprehending a child unnecessarily) or too little (e.g., failing to apprehend a child when necessary), but never the right thing. Non-critical reports focusing on "everyday practice" were seen by the social workers as almost non-existent.

P1: Media is a large part, I mean, usually when it, when something is brought up by the media, it is when the social services have failed or made mistakes (rest of group expresses agreement) or when there has been a tragic outcome in a case.

P3: They never report…

P1: On anything positive. (FG 1)

Depictions of the social services on social media were also seen as important for shaping public perceptions; the current disinformation campaign against social services in Sweden (see the introduction in this article) is one example. Much of the disinformation has been spread through social media platforms, and in one of the municipalities included in the study, the campaign had contributed to protests against the social services: *"There have been demonstrations here [outside the social services office] and in front of city hall. There have been quite bizarre accusations, completely detached from reality" (P2/FG 6)*. Mainly, the protests concerned the (mis)use of coercive measures, and the disinformation campaign was seen by the social workers as enabling dissatisfied clients and others to gather and voice their discontent. Although the social workers contended that it was hard

to combat, they also expressed frustration regarding their ability to defend themselves against criticism or discredit. Even if social workers wish to argue against misleading or false statements, the Secrecy Act prevents them from doing so if the statements pertain to specific cases, effectively hiding the social work profession (see p. 9). According to the participants, this leads to a one-sided picture in both traditional and social media, leaving out essential information. Nevertheless, some social workers argued that secrecy is sometimes used as an excuse to avoid getting involved in public debates: *"I think we hide a bit behind our obligation of secrecy. We have talked about opening up the office [to the public, for example; it's like 'should we really?' It's like we don't want to show [ourselves]. I think we could show a lot more without jeopardizing secrecy" (P4/FG 3)*. Moreover, it was also recognized by the participants that, although critical and one-sided, media reports can play an important role in the uncovering of malpractice.

P2: There is usually a lot of focus on the negative things […] When things go wrong.

P4: Yes, but also high-profile cases like [case] and…

P2: [case]

P4: Yes, cases like that where, well… Given how the social services handled those cases, the critique is both important and completely justified. (FG 5)

Relatedly, the participants also recognized the potential of media in raising people's knowledge and awareness. Social workers gave examples of TV shows depicting other public services, such as the police, and noted that a similar balanced portrayal of everyday work within the social services could potentially improve the public's perceptions of their profession.

The Potential Role of Socio-demography. Less important aspects influencing public views were discussed, including socio-economic and demographic factors. For instance, the social workers expressed how place-related issues and characteristics associated with urban versus rural places influence public perceptions of the social services and social workers. For better or for worse, it was believed that the smaller environment and the connectedness between people in rural places contributed to the spread of rumors about the social services: "*In a small town like this, many families know each other, and it is likely that they will talk to one another about their experiences or their case manager" (P2| FG 3)*. However, the participants stressed that it also works the other way around, that positive encounters spread more easily as well. A similar discussion concerned individuals living in low-income versus high-income areas, and individuals from different educational and economic backgrounds. The social workers understood these aspects as being on a continuum, and they argued that adverse views were more common at both ends of this continuum than in the middle.

P4: For us, it is equally hard to work in low-income areas and high-income areas. I would even argue that it is harder to work in high-income areas. It is extremely hard for us to get access; the walls are extremely high. We do not have the slightest clue about what is going on there. To involve the authorities, us or the police, when something is going on just doesn't happen. The same applies to low-income areas […] High walls there as well, but for different reasons…

P1: I agree, I too believe that. (FG 4)

In the first case, it was argued that the adverse views arose from the individuals not seeing themselves as even close to being prospective clients of social services and that it was generally best to avoid involving authorities. In the latter case, it was instead argued that the resistance stemmed from the fact that many people in similar circumstances have, or are forced to have, contact with the social services. In other words, many in this group were argued to have had experiences of the social services that were not always good or beneficial for themselves, and this spills over to others. Similarly, the social workers had noted that people with migrant backgrounds may fear the social services, often due to prior experiences in countries with corrupt authorities: *"If you have lived in a country where authorities are actually a threat […] it can be really tough to get a notification from the social services. The only thing you have to compare with is, plainly speaking, horrible" (P1/FG 6)*. The social workers also emphasized that the ongoing disinformation campaign probably intensifies this apprehension.

The last aspect highlighted by the social workers as a possible socio-demographic influencer of public views was age. Participants experienced that older people tend to view the social services as a last resort, something that is best avoided if possible: *"I'm thinking about age, for the older generation it is much more shameful to reach out for help. Kind of like 'No, I don't want anything to do with the social services…'" (P3/FG 6)*. The social workers believed that this attitude came about because the social services used to have a bad reputation, and that this lives on in the memories of older individuals. They also argued that older individuals tend to view the concerns addressed by social services as private matters that should be handled personally.

Discussion

Social workers' understandings of the public were characterized by ambiguity—it was perceived as both a homogenic construct in terms of anyone and everyone, and also as a segmented entity. This ambiguity is not surprising. As Carrigan and Fatsis (2021) note, the concept

of "the public" seems resistant to rigid definition as it is inherently dependent on the messiness of what it seeks to capture and describe. Nevertheless, we identify a clear distinction in the social workers' reasoning about the public. Current clients are not seen as members of the public, and social workers do not view themselves as the public, at least when in their professional role. It is also notable that social workers expect differences in views between societal groups; friends and family, for example, were anticipated to have a greater understanding, sympathy, and knowledge of their work than others (cf. Beddoe et al., 2019).

Adverse Public Views and the Establishment of Taint

The findings illustrate how social workers perceive public views of the profession and of the social services organization as predominately negative. Paradoxically, they also emphasize that there is some admiration and appreciation as well. This finding corroborates previous studies showing that social workers' experiences of public perceptions include feelings of both pride and stigma (Beddoe et al., 2019). As in existing studies (see e.g., Staniforth et al., 2021), social workers in this study assert that the general public lacks knowledge about the social services and often views it as equivalent to child protection. Moreover, similar to Legood et al. (2016), the participants in this study experienced stigmatizing public perceptions such as social workers being "social justice warriors," that they "kidnap children," and that they are untrustworthy. Although not as prevalent, contrasting views were expressed, that is, people believe that social workers perform important work (cf. LeCroy & Stinson, 2004), they can "fix everything," and they are tough because they can manage the emotional pressures and poor working conditions associated with this work. The findings in this study also illustrate how the selectiveness, regulations, and mission of the social services lead people to associate social work with shame, stigma, and control. It was argued that being in contact with or receiving support from social workers is seen as shameful and, as a consequence, that it is best to avoid the social services as far as possible.

Ambiguous public views, shame, and stigma are commonly found in relation to professions that could be characterised as socially tainted (Hughes, 1958; Simpson & Simpson, 2018). This is particularly evident in relation to an experienced "spillover effect" of stigma in terms of shamefulness and avoidance of social services. As noted by Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, 2014), stigma projected upon people whom the professionals regularly encounter (clients) tends to be transferred to the professionals themselves (see also. Goffman, 1963). Moreover, there is a vicious cycle (cf. Chenot, 2011) where stigma projected onto the clients is transmitted to the social workers and then back again. In other words, it is not only the stigma associated with the clients that is projected upon the social workers; being in contact with a social worker becomes a source of stigma in and of itself (cf. Wacquant, 2009).

Relatedly, the social workers' accounts of public perceptions include aspects that may contribute to moral taint of the social services. According to Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), moral taint is likely to be established when workers use intrusive or confrontational working methods. The possibility for social workers to forcibly remove children or to suggest involuntary addiction treatment can indeed be perceived as both intrusive and confrontational. Although it is society, through politically established laws and regulations, that justifies and deems such interventions necessary, it is the social workers' duty to implement them (Lipsky, 1980/2010). However, the moral taint associated with the authority to apply involuntary care seems to rest most heavily on child welfare social workers. For social workers working with addiction treatment, the logic appears to be reversed. Relatives often ask for involuntary care even if its application cannot be legally justified.

Moreover, participants identified misconduct as important to the public perception of the profession, and they emphasised that it has contributed greatly to adverse views. This, too, is in line with morally tainted dirty work, as conduct that is perceived as deviant from social norms, sometimes even as deceptive, produces moral taint (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Soral et al., 2022). In addition to the person or organization responsible for the perceived immoral conduct, other social workers and social services agencies are at high risk of "indirect contagion." Social workers' experiences indicate that they are often held accountable for issues they are not directly linked to. Similar to the "spillover effect" of stigma observed between clients and social workers, it appears that this phenomenon can also occur between professionals.

Admiration and Appreciation and Their Role in the Establishment of Taint

The social workers encountered both admiration and appreciation. People often acknowledged the importance of their work and expressed gratitude that the social workers could manage tasks they were unwilling or unable to perform themselves. However, these positive views do not necessarily reduce taint. Workers in tainted jobs often receive recognition, even though their tasks are considered "dirty" by nature. The reluctance or inability of others to engage in such work further emphasizes its impure character. For socially and morally

tainted professions, these barriers tend to be emotional, as the discussions between the participants in this study illustrate. However, the level of "dirtiness" appears to be related to the type of social work in question. Child welfare social workers encounter statements such as "I could never do your job" more than the social workers in the other fields. It seems, therefore, that some social work tasks and areas produce more taint than others (cf. Baran et al., 2012; Liljegren, 2008).

Media as Establisher and Amplifier of Taint

How media cover social work is experienced as the most salient contributor to (adverse) public views and taint. Social workers argue that traditional media focus on critique and report primarily on mistakes and malpractice, and the reports commonly lack essential information and/or are completely incorrect. The Secrecy Act adds to this feeling by preventing social workers from publicly "correcting these wrongs" to balance the narrative. Given that previous studies have shown similar results (see e.g., Beddoe et al., 2019; Hobbs & Evans, 2017; Legood et al., 2016), it seems that the assumed derogatory power of the mass media and social workers' frustration at not being able to counter media narratives are not limited to Sweden but are also experienced in other countries. The accounts relating to the disinformation campaign suggest that this is valid for social media narratives as well, at least when scrutiny on different social media platforms is substantial (cf. Ranstorp & Ahlerup, 2023).

Importantly, our study shows that social workers also view media positively in relation to accurate reports on misconduct that lead to desirable changes in practice and/or policy (cf. Hedin & Månsson, 2012). Additionally, participants asserted that general media reports could be beneficial for public understanding of social work if the media changed its focus so that not only criticism was highlighted. As some of the social workers noted, the media can be a powerful ally in efforts to increase public knowledge of social work—thereby reducing adverse views, stigma, and dirt (cf. Asher, 2014; Phillips et al., 2012). This would be especially true if the media were to show everyday social work practice.

To ensure that both traditional and social media narratives reflect the images of social work that practitioners aspire to convey, it is essential for social workers to become more actively involved in the creation of these narratives. Currently, very few social workers participate in public forums where social issues and the role of social work can be discussed (Lundaälv, 2019). Although the secrecy act restricts them from discussing specific cases, it remains feasible to engage in discussions about social work at a general level, focusing on "everyday practice." This engagement could take place across various platforms, including social media, podcasts, and by proactively reaching out to traditional media channels to communicate their perspectives. Additionally, outreach to schools could play a crucial role in increasing awareness of social work and fostering positive perceptions of social workers from an early age (cf. Spånberger Weitz, 2024).

Given the potential of media engagement, the question of the mass media's role in shaping public views of social work becomes particularly relevant. Similar to other studies (e.g., Legood et al., 2016), participants in this study assert that media is the most important factor influencing (adverse) views. At the same time, research has shown no direct associations between patterns in individuals' media use and trust in social services (Nilsson et al., 2024). Notably, media scrutiny toward social work appears to vary between countries, while social workers' viewpoints tend to converge. This complexity highlights the need for further research into the influence of media on public views of social work.

Concluding Remarks and Implications for Practice and Research

This study highlights the paradoxes, ambiguities, and tensions in social workers' understanding of the public and its perceptions. The public is seen as both a collective and segmented entity, with dominant adverse views counterbalanced by appreciation and admiration. The media, while often contributing to adverse views, is also recognized as a key player in exposing malpractice and potentially enhancing knowledge.

The narratives of social workers reveal that the selectivity and mission of social services, combined with mass media narratives, effectively taint the social work profession socially and morally. Social workers are tasked with aiding socially vulnerable and often stigmatised individuals, which involves intrusive, controlling measures, including the use of force when legally justified. These factors contribute to the public perception that social services are best avoided and that the work is undesirable or unmanageable. However, the level of taint appears to vary across social services areas, with child welfare social workers experiencing more pronounced taint and its consequences. This insight suggests that efforts to counter negative views of social work should initially focus on child welfare. Therefore, it is particularly important for social workers to engage more actively in public forums such as media, social media, and schools to increase knowledge of the profession in general and child welfare in particular.

This study offers several key insights into how social workers experience 'the public' and its perceptions of social work. It provides additional knowledge about potential contributors to adverse public views and taint and deepens our understanding of how stigma operates within professional social work.

Firstly, to our knowledge, this is the first study to explicitly investigate the "notion of the public" from the perspective of social workers, providing a starting point for conceptualisation.

Secondly, examining social work practice through the "dirty work" lens allows us to understand how inherent aspects of the profession, coupled with public narratives, socially and morally stigmatise social work professionals. This overlooked perspective offers valuable insights into the lives and challenges of social workers.

Thirdly, the study identifies a "vicious cycle" of stigma, suggesting that stigma is not only transferred from clients to professionals, as suggested in dirty work literature, but can also operate in reverse within social work.

Lastly, the study provides direction for efforts to improve public perceptions of social work and offers suggestions from social workers for structuring such improvements.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research. Finally, we encourage others to continue this venture into public perceptions of social services and social workers' experiences thereof. Much more knowledge is needed. This study is a starting point, but it has its limitations. The focus on individual and family care says little about the experiences of social workers in other areas of social services and/or social workers in private and voluntary organizations. We have also specifically explored how social workers delineate the public and experience public perceptions, together with their views on salient contributors to these perceptions. However, the implications for social work practice and the private lives of social workers have not been the primary focus. Given the consequences of social and moral taint as asserted by Ashforth and Kreiner (2014), further exploration of this topic would be highly valuable. Additionally, studies comparing experiences of public perceptions among social workers in different types of welfare settings could yield significant insights. Studies examining the interplay between public perceptions and social workers' job satisfaction would also be beneficial. Moreover, the qualitative orientation means that it is not possible to generalize on a population level. Quantitative studies on both national and international levels could therefore provide essential insights on general trends that are not visible here.

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Consent to Participate

All participants provided written informed consent before participation.

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