Historical Analysis of Media Representation of Safeguarding Children Social Work

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Historical Context:

- There has been a long history of safeguarding/child protection in the UK. Child welfare policy has developed with over a century of legislation.

- In 1889, the “children’s charter” was the first act of parliament, for the prevention of cruelty to children. The state was allowed for the first time to intervene in relations between parents and children.

- The Children Act 1989, gave every child the right to protection from abuse and exploitation and the right to enquiries to safeguard their welfare.
Historical Context:

- The Children Act 2004 was passed after the 2003 Laming Report into the death of Victoria Climbie. This report found that health, police and social services missed 12 opportunities to prevent her death.

- The Children and Families Act 2014 made changes to the law to give greater protection to vulnerable children.
The facts:

- Maria Colwell died on the 6th January 1973 aged 7, at the hands of her step-father while under the supervision of East Sussex County Council.
- Maria was removed from her mother’s care due to neglect, and lived happily with an aunt after her father’s death.
- Was returned to her mother, at the mothers request.
- Despite warnings of abuse, and 30 calls to social services from neighbours, she remained in a violent household.
Inquiry reports:

- The Maria Colwell Inquiry Report was 120 pages and approximately 50000 words. The counsel for the inquiry consisted of two QC’s.
- Inquiry team was supported by one secretary.
- Seven parties to the inquiry had legal representation.
- 65 witnesses were examined, 5 witnesses gave expert evidence.
- 13 witnesses provided statements which were read in whole or in part by the committee.
The comment in the Daily Mail leader on 29 January was fairly typical: ‘Thirty years ago Britain was shocked when seven year old Maria Colwell was beaten to death by the stepfather. Then too, there was utter determination that such tragedies would never happen again. Yet despite other victims and countless inquiries since, have the fundamental lessons really been learned? Hardly.’ (Daily Mail, 2003).

There were 12 chances to save Victoria Climbie. This was one. Seven months later she was dead: Twelve chances missed to save Victoria Climbie. (The Guardian London, 2003).

Victoria Climbie inquiry: 'Her suffering and death marked a gross failure of the system and were inexcusable': Mistakes: Report vents fury on supervisors and managers of child protection services. (The Guardian London, 2003).
SOCIAL workers blasted for failing to save murdered child abuse victim Victoria Climbie are in line for pay hikes of up to GBP 4,000. North London's Haringey Council was last night set to agree the GBP 3.5 million deal, to include two staff suspended on full pay pending a public inquiry's findings. (Daily Star, 2002).

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS HELPED TO KILL VICTORIA CLIMBIE. (The Independent, 2002).

KILLED BY ANTI RACISM;
It was one of Britain's worst child abuse cases. But as this damning investigation reveals, the real cause of Victoria Climbie's death was the antiracist lunacy of politically correct social workers. (Daily Mail, 2002).
The facts:

- 30 years later the Victoria Climbie case was very similar to that of Maria Colwell.
- After suffering months of horrific abuse, Victoria died aged just eight on 25th February 2000.
- Her parents had sent her to live with her great aunt, first in France then in the UK, in the hope Victoria would get a good education and enjoy a better life.
- Marie Therese Kuoao Victoria’s great-aunt and Carl Manning Kuoao’s boyfriend, were both found guilty of her murder at the Old Bailey in January 2001.
In April 2001 John Hutton, the then health minister responsible for children’s services announced that the inquiry into Victoria’s death will be made public.

It would be the first ‘tripartite’ investigation using powers under the Children’s Act, the NHS Act and Police Act.

The report is 400 pages in length and consists of nearly 200000 words.

159 witnesses presented evidence both orally and in writing, 119 in writing only and one witness provided oral evidence only.

In order to address its recommendations the enquiry organised five seminars which had 120 participants.
All the evidence and the report itself was available for viewing on the enquiry website.

The inquiry itself consisted of:

- One secretary to the inquiry, one solicitor to the inquiry and three counsel to the inquiry.
- One secretariat of seven people.
- A legal team consisting of 13 people, two special advisors.
- 10 contractors consisting of two for communication, one for sound and seven general.
Social services and social workers themselves in the UK traditionally suffer from bad press.

Social workers are frequently ‘press ganged’ by journalist alleging a by now well known litany of ‘sins’ (see chapter 5, Aldridge (1994); and Parton (1991)).

Journalist regularly use the term ‘Moral Panic’ to describe the process which politicians, commercial promoters and media habitually attempt to incite.
There are important consequences for this unrelenting press criticism and misrepresentation of social work.

Social workers become demoralised which then makes them potentially change the way they practice.

By helping to shape public opinion, this way it imparts ultimately on social policy concerning social workers and their clients.

Both ‘mega crimes’ (Soothill et al., 2002) and welfare scandals are species of ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 1973).

Moira Peelo (2006) suggested how newspapers can contribute to the construction of ‘social commentary’ occasioned by certain ‘signal crimes’ (Innes, 2004) in this case Peelo’s example, homicide.
Analysis:

- Social commentary is generated through a ‘stylised dialogue made up of a collection of authorial techniques that attempt to align the reader emotionally with victimhood’ (Peelo, 2006: 160).

- A ‘mediated witness’, frames events in such a way that the newspaper reader is invited to share closely in the story of the crime by ‘identifying with the emotions of those who have been hurt’ (p.162).

- Thus the offence is able to pass ‘into cultural and social awareness and contribute to the construction of a contested framework (public narrative) within the struggle for control of the crime agenda takes place’ (p.169).

- Welfare scandals which are associated in the mass media and the public mind, have influenced the public policy in relation to child protection practice.
Therefore, victims and victimhood, are central to the way in which newspapers, position themselves and their readers in relation to ‘mega crimes’. Scandal is the equivalent of the mega crime, the press helps us to know when to boo and hiss and when to cheer.

Both the Maria Colwell and Victoria Climbie` cases in the UK have demonstrated how a continuous focus on individual instances of failure in professional practice, serve to represent child abuse as a series of specific failures in the mechanisms of child protection.

Therefore, the apportionment of blame and the attribution of victimhood, is as such that the child is the victim and the social worker is the villain, even more so than the parent.
Analysis

- It could be said that ‘social work’ which is defined in the media constructed discourses, is just that – a media construction.

- Media reports often stereotype and provide simplistic but enduring constructions which do little to reflect the complexity and uncertainty which characterises social work practice.
Analysis

- **Categories that need to be looked at:**
  - Politicians national (government, MPs) local councillors
  - Victims
  - Perpetrators and those who helped them
  - Parents
  - Siblings
  - Community organisations
  - Legislation and policy
Professional groups

- Police
- Social workers
- Teachers
- Medics
- Researchers / academics
References/Bibliography


