

Portrayal of Social Workers in Films: What's Changed?

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Intro

- Research started as part of a class project for SLWK 7001: Social Work Practice Research with Dr. Eli Manning in the Master of Social Work program at Dalhousie University during the 2019-2020 academic year.
- Group consisted of Hazel Ling (MSW Fall 2020) and Heidi Meagher (MSW Fall 2021?) and Kathryn Giacomantonio (MSW Fall 2021?)

Research Question

- What is the image of social workers as portrayed in mainstream films since 1999?
 - Our research led us to Freeman & Valentine (2004) who had looked at the same thing from 1938-1998.

Influence of Media

- Connection between portrayal and public perception:
 - Portrayal on tv (positive or negative) connected to change in public perception (Gibelman, 2004)
 - Positive portrayal in general media connected to positive perception (Slutsky & Gavra, 2017).
 - Media is both an influence on public and public knowledge, and a reflection of culture (Foley et al, 2019).
 - Impact of film images outweighs printed word (Gharaibeh, 2005).
 - Mass media considered the most significant influence on how people form attitudes and belief systems (Gabbard, 2001).
- In the Context of Social Work:
 - Survey of Californians in 2016 found “29 percent learned about social work from television or movies, 22 percent from print media, and 10 percent from social media.” (Arguello et al, 2018, p. 309).
 - Survey of MSWs in Florida: social workers believed they were viewed negatively (Zugazaga et al, 2006).
 - African American social work students equated social work with child protection (Williams et al, 2015).

Perception of General Public

- Little understanding of the role of social work: Often equated to child protection (Condie et al, 1978; Lecroy & Stinson, 2004; Williams et al, 2015), or 'babysnatchers' (Lightfoot et al, 2016).
- Negative perceptions of social workers (Zugazaga et al, 2006), low public confidence/not to be trusted (Ayre, 2001; LaLiberte et al, 2011). In some studies, negative perception was regardless of demographics (Dennison et al, 2007).
- Perception better locally in media vs nationally (Aldridge, 2004), and better in US vs UK (Reid & Misener, 2001).
- Negative perception of social workers has been consistent across mediums: novels, films and plays (Siporin, 1984); magazines, television, news and talk shows (Davenport & Davenport, 1997); one television program (Andrews, 1987); newspapers (Cooper, 2005), films and stage prior to WW II (Hiersteiner, 1998), and films from 1938-1998 (Freeman & Valentine, 2004).

Freeman & Valentine (2004)

- 'Through the Eyes of Hollywood: Images of Social Workers in Film: 1938-1998'

Film Selection

- Advanced search on Internet Movie Data Base (imdb.com) using key word 'social worker', release range of 1999-2019, and 'feature film' as type of media.
 - Original search done November 16, 2019.
 - Updated search conducted April 5, 2021, with same search criteria but for release range of 2019-2021. It generated 10 results.
- Original search generated 167 results.
 - Removed those not in English, list = 89
 - Removed movies from outside US/Canada, list = 72
 - Removed genre 'documentary', list = 64
 - Removed genre 'horror', list = 58
 - Of these, we were able to obtain 51 of these for viewing.

Movie review and pruning

- All 51 movies watched by at least one viewer.
- Data collected for analysis:
 - Area of practice of the 'social worker'
 - Demographics of social worker
 - Socioeconomic status of client
 - Client/worker relationship
 - Ethic violations
 - General portrayal (positive or negative)
- Movies were pruned for final analysis:
 - Movies where 'social worker' was not observed in the film = 5
 - Movies with limited potential reach:
 - Those with less than \$1 million in box office earnings = 11
 - Those with less than 750 ratings = 6
- 29 films were left for final analysis. Each had at least 2 independent viewers.

Images of Social Work: What's Changed?

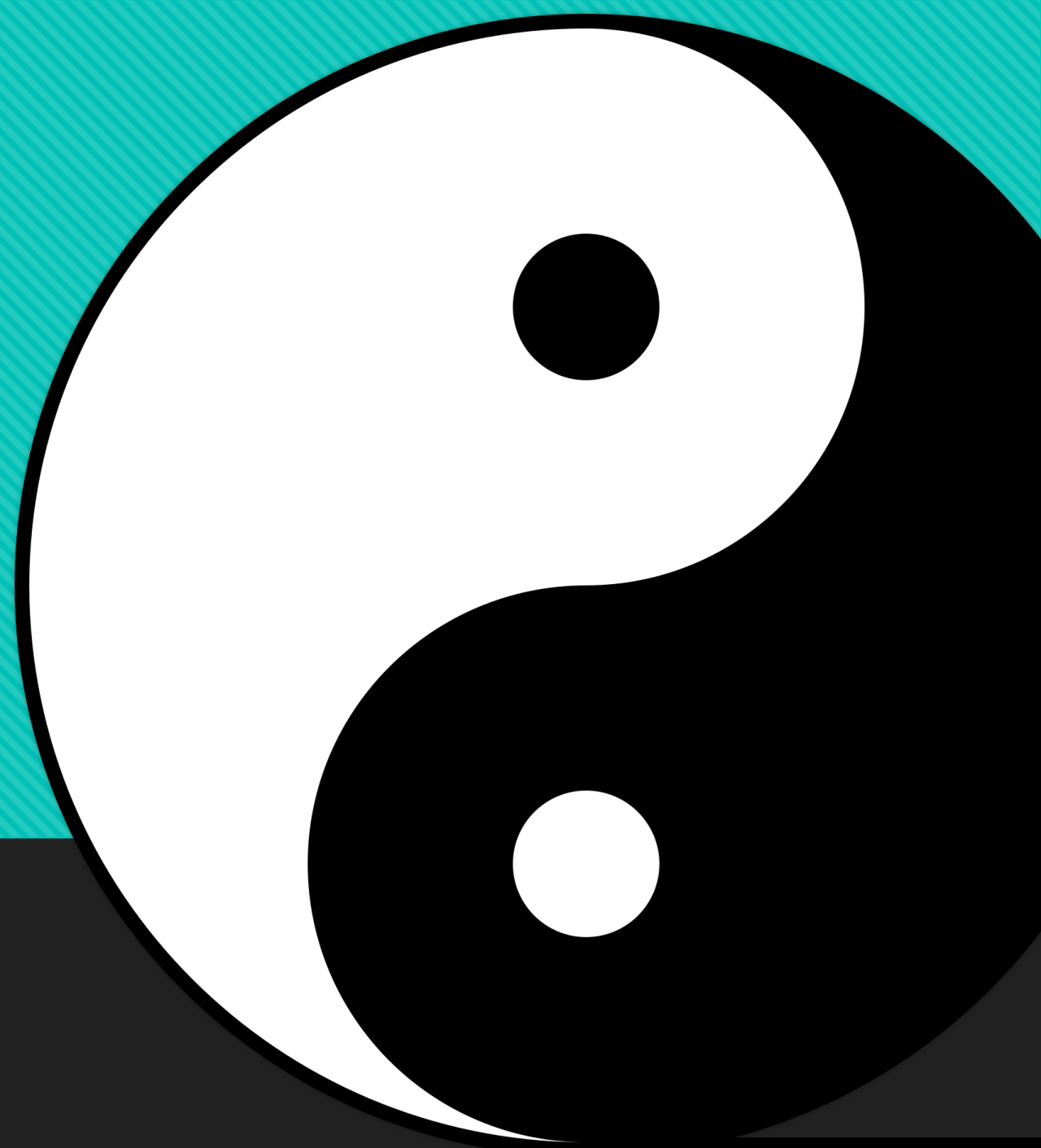
1938-1998

- Most social workers in child welfare.
- Primarily in role of social control and/or caretakers.
- Seen in subordinate positions of low authority.
- Often seen as sex objects and nurturers.
- Generally negatively upholding stereotypes.

1999-2020

- 24 of 38 social workers (69%) within child protection.
- Mostly negative portrayals.
 - Of these, most troubling within two animated children's films: Lilo & Stitch (2002) & Mr. Peabody & Sherman (2014).

Overall Portrayal of Social Worker's



Negative Image

- Mr. Peabody and Sherman (2014)
 - White female social worker portrayed as large, mean and angry.

○ Photo Credit: (www.imdb.com)



Negative Image

- Lilo & Stitch (2002):
 - Black male social worker ("Cobra Bubbles") is portrayed as physically intimidating.
 - He appears as uncaring and terrifying.

○ Photo Credit: (www.imdb.com)



Positive Image

○ Precious (2009):

○ Photo Credit: (www.imdb.com)



Positive Image

○Southpaw (2015):

○Photo Credit: (www.imdb.com)



Gender: What's Changed?

1938-1998

- Female social workers make the majority (36 of 51, or 70.6%).
- More often, female social workers portrayed as incompetent, having difficulty with their interpersonal life and skills, and sexualized (compared to male social workers).
- More often, male social workers portrayed as heroic and competent, but also portraying negative stereotypes of unfeeling and insensitive.

1999-2020

- 28 of 38 social workers (73.7%) were female.
- Female social workers
 - Only one slept with her client! And only two portrayed in a sexual manner!
 - Still generally portrayed as burnt out and uncaring bureaucrats.
- Male social workers
 - not portrayed more heroically but were still portrayed as unfeeling and uncaring (ranging from gruff and domineering, to terrifying) and uncaring bureaucrats.

Gender

- The one positive portrayal of male social worker: Queen of Katwe (2016).
 - However, 'social worker' is an engineer by trade (not a social worker).

○ Photo Credit: (www.imdb.com)



Race: What's Changed?

1938-1998

- Most social workers were white (45 of 51, or 88.2%).
- Few social workers were Black (6 of 51, or 11.8%)
- Racial issues relating to clients prominent (perpetuating negative stereotypes).

1999-2020

- Many social workers were white (23 of 38, or 60.5%).
- More diverse social workers portrayed (39.4%).
 - 13 of 38 Black (34.2%)
 - 2 of 38 Latino (11.8%)
 - 1 of 38 mixed race (5.2%)

Race

○ New theme:

○ higher socioeconomic white families fostering and adopting Black, Brown, and Latino children.

○ Photo Credit: (www.imdb.com)



Challenging our social justice lens

- 'The Occasional Evil of Angels: Learning from the Experiences of Aboriginal Peoples and Social Work' by Cindy Blackstock from 2009:
 - "When evidence surfaces that harm did arise directly from the actions or inactions of social work or other helping professions we often default to rationalizing the occurrence as exceptional, using one of the predominant arguments: 1) they acted based on the sensibilities of the day – we know better now; 2) they did not know about the harm; 3) it was outside of their mandate, and; 4) if the harm is so appalling that it cannot be rationalized as coming from a place of good intentions, they were immoral or bad individuals who are exceptions to the group." [P 32]
 - "Perhaps part of the reasons that good people can do such immoral things in the name of mandates is too often our personal morality is usurped by our need to comply with that is deemed morally good by institutions we affiliate with or work with." [P 34]
 - "As the doers of good, we have not been trained to stand in the shadow of our harmful actions, so we ignore or minimize them." [P 33-34]

Questions & Ideas for Critical Self-Reflection

- What are we doing to change the diversity and representation in our workplaces?
- What are we doing to critically unpack our own biases?
- How are we making space for BIPOC's voices and concerns? Or for other marginalized groups?
 - And how are we acting on these concerns? Are we requiring independent inquiries to 'validate' the concerns and legitimize the need for change?
- What are we doing to actively be allies and change makers instead of merging within the oppressive systems we work within?
 - I enjoy getting a pay cheque too! But how can we do better?

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Appendix 1: Movies 1999-2011

Movie Title (Year)	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Area of Practice
Mercy (2000)	Female	40s	White	Child Protection
The Glass House (2001)	Female	40s/50s	White	Child Protection
I Am Sam (2001)	Female	40s	Black	Child Protection
Savage Messiah (2002)	Female; Male	40s x2	White x2	Child Protection x2
Lilo & Stitch (2002)	Male	40s	Black	Child Protection
Saint Ralph (2004)	Male	30s	White	Child Protection
The Secret Life of Words (2005)	Female	60s	White	Private Counsellor
The Night Listener (2006)	Female	40s	White	Child Protection
Normal (2007)	Male x2	30s; 50s	White x2	Youth Justice; Private Counsellor
Martian Child (2007)	Female; Male	30s; 50s	Black; White	Child Protection x2
Precious (2009)	Female x2	30s; 50s	Mixed Race; Black	Child Protection x2
Bruno (2009)	Female	45	Black	Child Protection
Life <u>As</u> We Know It (2010)	Female	40s	White	Child Protection
A Bag of Hammers (2011)	Male x2	30s x2	White x2	Child Protection x2
360 (2011)	Female	50s	Black	Adult Justice
50/50 (2011)	Female	24	White	Hospital Therapist
Total	Female x13 Male x 8	Average 40s	White x 14 Black x 6 Mixed x 1	Child Protection x 16 Private Counsellor x2 Justice x2 Hospital Therapist x1

Appendix 2: Movies 2012-2020

Movie Title (Year)	Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Area of Practice
Moonrise Kingdom (2012)	Female	50s	White	Child Protection
Short Term 12 (2013)	Male; Female	50s; 60s	Black; White	Counsellor x2
Mr. Peabody & Sherman (2014)	Female	40s	White	Child Protection
The November Man (2014)	Female	20s	White	Counsellor
Southpaw (2015)	Female x2	40s; 30s	White; Black	Child Protection x2
Father's & Daughter's (2015)	Female	30s	White	Counsellor
Queen of Katwe (2016)	Male	40s	Black	Youth Worker
To <u>The Bone</u> (2017)	Female	40s	Latino	Counsellor
The Glass Castle (2017)	Female	40s	White	Hospital Therapist
<u>Don't Worry He Won't Get Far On Foot</u> (2018)	Female	30s	White	Disability
Instant Family (2018)	Female x3	40sx2; 50s	Black x2; White	Child Protection x3
<u>Shazaam!</u> (2019)	Female	40s	Black	Child Protection
The Joker (2019)	Female	50s	Black	Mental Health
Total	Female x15 Male x2	Average 40s	White x 9 Black x 7 Latino x1	Child Protection x 8 Counsellor x 5 Youth Worker x1 Hospital Therapist x1 Disability x1 Mental Health x1