

**PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL WORK
AND SOCIAL CARE
REPORT OF FINDINGS**

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BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH OBJECTIVES I

Background

During the course of the on-going Social Care Desk Research project, it emerged that there was very little information available regarding public attitudes towards and opinion about social care and social work. In fact, only two sources were found and these only examined specific aspects of social care and social work.

In view of the lack of available information covering the general public, it was decided that there was a need for qualitative research to examine the image and perceptions of social work and social care work amongst the population as a whole. Research Works Limited was commissioned by COI Communications on behalf of the Department of Health to conduct the qualitative research study.

Objectives

The main objectives of this research were to establish amongst the general public:

- The attitudes toward and image of social work and social care as services, and where these images and attitudes came from;
 - The attitudes towards and image of social workers and social care staff: who they were, what characteristics distinguished them from other workers, how skilled they were, and from where these images were derived
 - The appeal of social work and social care careers/jobs and how they compared with other types of employment;
 - The perceptions of the skills and qualifications required and training requirements for both social work and social care, plus the accessibility of training
 - Any perceived barriers to future recruitment
- ➔ **Overall, to complete the picture of social work and social care to inform recruitment and retention.**

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY II

The research approach was qualitative and the format was focus group discussions. The following details how the sample was segmented:

6 focus group discussions

- 7-8 respondents per group
- group duration: 1 hour 30 minutes

- Group 1 - Female, aged 18-24 years old, BC1C2, with A levels or above, studying or working

- Group 2 - Female, aged 25-44 years old, C1C2D, with school age children and part-time job or considering part-time job

- Group 3 - Female, 45-65 years old, BC1C2, working or considering working (full or part-time)

- Group 4 - Male, 18-24 years old, BC1C2, with A levels or above, studying or working

- Group 5 - Male, 25-49 years old, C1C2D, working

- Group 6 - Male, 50-65 years old, C1C2D, mainly early retired with some working

The sample reflected the population by covering different demographic criteria.

- Respondents were drawn from different age brackets (18-24 years old, 25-44 years old, 45-65 years old) to reflect different life and work stages (a mix of those studying, working full-time, part-time and retired was achieved).
- Respondents were taken from different socio economic groups - both BC1C2 and C1C2D.
- Respondents were screened to ensure that none worked or had close friends or family who worked in either social work or social care.

These demographic criteria ensured that varying attitudes towards work, careers and aspirations were revealed.

Fieldwork was conducted on the 7th & 8th February in: Birmingham, High Wycombe and Stockport by members of the Research Works team.

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY III

- The findings of this study indicate that **attitudes** amongst the general public towards social work and social care were broadly consistent across age, sex and socio-economic group. This consistency was in part a reflection of the main shared source of information about social work – the media.
- Different levels of **knowledge** about social work and social care emerged amongst the sample. C2DE respondents and female respondents were more likely to have come into contact with social carers and social workers, and therefore were the most knowledgeable about social care and social work.
- **Perceptions of social work** were heavily influenced by the **media**. Coverage was unanimously recalled as negative. Respondents reported that they always heard bad things about social workers – seizing children (e.g. Kilshaw adoption) and making mistakes (e.g. Cleveland).
- Despite a certain limited amount of knowledge about social care and social work provided by personal contact and the media, respondents showed an **extremely limited understanding of the difference** between social work and social care.
- This confusion was generated by the term “social work” which was initially often understood in a **generic** and rather **old-fashioned** way e.g. “going down to the social” or “getting help from the social”. It was only after discussion that respondents managed to discuss differences between social work and social care.
- **Social workers** were viewed as those who “checked up” on “problem” families, and were strongly associated child-care, and in particular investigating allegations of child abuse.
- **Contact with social workers** was not an experience to contemplate with ease or reassurance. They were seen as responsible for decision-making and the organisation of services in difficult and traumatic cases.
- **Social work was perceived as an extremely demanding job** – both stressful and (potentially) personally dangerous. In return, respondents assumed a poor level of pay, and were very unsure about whether social work offered opportunities for promotion or specialism.
- Media coverage had caused respondents to **question the efficacy of social workers** and social services. Despite these doubts, most agreed that social work was a tough job to do under difficult circumstances.

- Respondents demonstrated a very poor level of knowledge regarding the **qualifications and training** required in order to become a social worker. Respondents focussed on the personal qualities they felt were required e.g. communication skills, patience, impartiality, and inner emotional strength.
- An emphasis on personality traits, and a motivation to “do good”, combined with a lack of awareness of a career structure, lead the majority to conclude that social work was a **vocation** rather than a **profession**. Ultimately, social workers were considered to hold a similar status to broadly equivalent professions such as nursing, teaching or the police.
- The stereotypical **image** of a social worker consistently emerged as being female, young, “hippyish” and idealistic in outlook. Despite these partially negative views, the work undertaken by social workers was deemed to be necessary and worthwhile.
- In terms of **recruitment**, the majority felt the social worker’s job was very unappealing. More specifically, the day-to-day tasks envisaged e.g. problem solving, were perceived as difficult, unpleasant and frustrating. The job environment was expected to be depressing and lacking stimulation or progression. In essence, the focus on “people’s problems” limited perceptions of job or career potential possible within social work.
- **Social carers** were viewed as home helps, assisting the elderly in day-to-day practical tasks e.g. cooking, cleaning, personal hygiene. Carers were viewed as fulfilling a vital support to people in need.
- Respondents had more **contact** with social carers than social workers. There were several instances where respondents had elderly relatives being cared for by social carers.
- **Social care was viewed more positively as an occupation**, albeit not appealing as an option for the majority. Social care did not suffer from the negative image associated with social workers.
- Again, the majority of the sample had limited and superficial knowledge of the **qualifications and training requirements** for social care. A basic education and more importantly a strong, friendly personality were felt to be the necessary pre-requisites for a job as a carer.
- **Women** were predominantly associated with social care, specifically older family women looking for a part-time job. The income was presumed to be low - equivalent to supermarket floor work or cleaning jobs. As a result, social care was not viewed as a career option for younger people or men.

- A majority focussed on the unappealing nature of the job and low pay in relation to social care. Once again, respondents tended to assume that being a social carer was a **vocation** people undertook *despite* the poor pay and conditions.
- Although respondents felt that the work of social carers was **invaluable**, they showed little willingness to contemplate a job in social care. Respondents were very much put off by their perception of a domestic and grueling job.
- This research indicates that there are certain findings to be considered in the future when thinking about recruitment strategy:
 - The lack of basic knowledge about both social work and social care (i.e. what they involve)
 - Generally poor impressions of the job responsibilities and parameters (i.e. pay, training, work environment, career progression etc...)
 - The low profile, status and lack of positive endorsement by wider society for both social care and social work

MAIN FINDINGS IV

4.1 Influencing Factors

It emerged that perceptions of social care and social work were influenced by a number of factors. These factors synthesized individual views of social care and social work.

Socio Economic Group

It was clear that those from C2D backgrounds were more likely to have come into contact with both social workers and social carers. Contact included interacting with social workers and carers in a their work context (e.g. a carer coming into an elderly relative's home) and on a personal level (e.g. living next door). Respondents were more likely, on the whole, to have met a social carer than a social worker, particularly when visiting or caring for elderly relatives in their own homes or residential settings.

Respondents from a BC1 background were less likely, overall, to have had any contact with either social workers or social carers, whether professionally or personally. As a consequence, respondents felt more distanced from social workers and social carers. Due to this lack of contact and knowledge, BC1 respondents were more likely to perceive a "stigma" attached to these occupations.

BC1 respondents' perceptions of social work were dominated by media coverage, since this was largely their only point of reference. Respondents recalled negative images and stories of overworked social workers intervening in problem situations, and sometimes making high profile mis-judgements. BC1 respondents' immediate perceptions of social care were of low paid, low profile jobs. They did not consider this type of job aspirational enough for themselves or their children.

Gender

Women tended to know more about social work and social care than men. This appeared to be the result of their caring role as mothers of children and daughters of older people. Being involved in older and younger individuals' personal care tended to have brought them into some level of contact with social services.

Men knew much less about either social work or social care. In the course of their professional lives few had reason to come into contact with people in such roles. The exception was retired men, who had the opportunity to meet social carers when visiting or caring for elderly relatives in their own homes or residential settings.

Male respondents strongly perceived both social work and social care as "women's jobs". They tended to feel that a woman's typical role as the main family carer gave her the necessary experience to do the jobs.

Media

Attitudes towards social work were widely influenced by press coverage. For many respondents the media (both newspapers and radio and television news) was *the* most dominant source of information about social work. Respondents mentioned the news and press coverage of high profile cases e.g. the Kilshaw adoption, the Anna Climbie case. From these sources respondents tended to learn about allegations of mistakes.

There was also recall of television documentaries and dramatizations involving social workers, which tended to emphasize social workers intervening (often abruptly) in people's lives. These programmes revolved around child care issues e.g. adoption and child safety;

"You're always hearing problems, you always hear about this has happened, you never hear stories about this girl was saved or the family was saved, it's all negativity in the paper." (Female, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

"It always tends to be bad press doesn't it that you pick up on." (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

"I mean you only hear about the bad ones" (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

Lack of knowledge

It emerged that respondents knew very little about social workers and carers and what these roles entailed. It became clear that respondents were often very confused, and unable to distinguish between social work and social care. Initially, social workers and social carers tended to be grouped together as people who worked for social services in a caring capacity – some one who helps;

"My elderly aunt needs help from social people." (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

Part of this confusion stemmed from archaic interpretations of the term "social work" e.g. *"going down to the social"*. Some respondents brought this kind of interpretation to the discussion, and the result was an extremely confused picture. When asked to focus on what the terms "social care" and "social work" meant, the exact nature of the caring capacity was extremely vague;

"They came in when my husband hurt his foot to help him dress." (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

"Don't they do speech therapy?" (Male, 25-49 years, C1C2D)

"Meals on wheels...care for the elderly." (Male, 25-49 years, C1C2D)

“I tend to think of social workers as the people who make the decisions about who is going to go and look after people...a slightly more elevated body than the ancillary staff...and I think they’re very much wrapped up in a political correctness and there’s a lot of bad press about them ...” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

For a minority, confusion about whether there was a difference between social work and social care, and if so, what these differences were, did not necessarily resolve itself during the course of the focus group discussions. These respondents remained unsure of the differences, and some unconvinced that differences existed;

“...there to help people overcome problems or anything, anything in life really.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2D)

4.2 Social work

4.2.1 Spontaneous associations

The spontaneous view of social workers tended to be drawn from the media. Respondents associated social workers with families having difficulties, and a social worker’s presence was therefore felt to be a bad sign. The involvement of a social worker was almost felt to label a family “a problem family”.

Within this negative context, respondents had seen examples of tough tactics by social workers, for example social workers taking the US twins away from the Kilshaws in the middle of the night. These perceptions fostered the idea that social workers were nosy, and that their role was to “*check up on you*”. The involvement of a social worker was felt to be an accusation of poor parenting.

In addition, investigations into the role of social workers in high profile cases (e.g. Anna Climbie, Cleveland) had created doubts about social workers’ effectiveness and judgement. The media image of social workers as described by respondents was extreme: either highly active and heartless, or inactive and inept.

The old fashioned and negative associations some respondents had with the terms “social work” or “social worker” were also influential;

“I think a lot of people have an awful horror of the word. You say that the social worker is coming and it’s almost as if they’re going to put you away.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

“I think a bit of it is to do with the term social...you think it’s all tied in with unemployment and lower society.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

4.2.2 What do they do?

All the high profile media attention witnessed by respondents had focussed on children. Respondents tended to assume, therefore, that a social worker's role predominantly involved children, and in particular, child abuse. The level of media attention given to this issue meant that social work had become almost synonymous with child abuse.

The more knowledgeable knew that social workers had a role in many different areas e.g. elderly people, people with special needs, aftercare for people coming out of hospital. However, this knowledge was theoretical, and in reality, discussion about the role of social workers remained focussed upon children and child abuse.

A majority felt that social workers assessed problems, co-ordinated services to deal with the problems, and then did the follow up paperwork. In this way, most felt that social workers were less "hands on" than social carers, in that they organised services, rather than carried out the services themselves. In comparison with social carers, social workers were viewed as more powerful – decision makers in control of a bigger picture;

"I imagine it's sort of like in a team but you've all got your own sort of like families and you discuss different cases quite a lot I would have thought." (Male, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

"I'd say there's a lot of paperwork involved, even though you're doing a lot of things, because it's all government and education and all that palaver...a lot of writing down, hard work and paperwork as well as physical work." (Female, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

However, a vocal minority insisted that social workers also carried out personal care tasks e.g. getting elderly people out of the bath. Although, upon consideration, the majority view discriminated between the roles of social workers and social carers, those who disagreed tended to remain sceptical and unconvinced. These respondents tended to interpret "social work" as a generic (and somewhat old-fashioned) term;

"...but they go into houses and they do stuff." (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2D)

4.2.3 Skills and qualifications

Respondents clearly had no idea what formal skills and qualifications were needed to become a social worker. When probed, respondents assumed that candidates would need to achieve a GNVQ/A level standard. This assumption was based on a perception that social workers did have quite a high level of responsibility;

"It is a kind of skill really isn't it? Caring or looking after somebody." (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

“I thought they were quite well qualified...they’d have to have a degree.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

In addition it was assumed that candidates would need a lot of training. However, the training thought to be necessary was practical rather than strictly professional e.g. first aid and child minding. Again, respondents lapsed into an assumption that social work involved elements of social care;

“I would think if your job was to sort out benefits and stuff you may have to have qualifications in something but if you’re going to look after old people or whatever I don’t know.” (Male, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

Despite the fact that respondents did not know what qualifications and training were required to become a social worker, they had very clear ideas about the type of skills they felt were necessary to become a social worker.

Communication skills (being out-going and streetwise) were prioritised, considered essential for dealing with young, troubled people. To be able to communicate confidently was thought to be a route to gaining respect and trust. Once respected and trusted, respondents felt that social workers would be able to deal with tricky individuals.

Patience was also considered a necessity – the ability to deal with difficult people. Respondents were conscious that social workers might be sent into situations where those involved might not want to be helped. Impartiality was also mentioned – the ability to deal with situations fairly, even if upsetting or controversial. Interestingly, respondents also felt that discretion would be important - keeping information about cases confidential.

Most importantly, the personal quality felt to be a prerequisite for a social worker was inner, emotional strength. Because respondents were dwelling particularly on child abuse, they felt that many situations would be very traumatic, and that it would take a certain sort of resolution to be able to play a positive role in such circumstances;

“You’d see a lot of heart ache...” (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

Respondents felt that inner, emotional strength was a necessity for a social worker because they were assuming social workers only dealt with problems.

Ideally, respondents were keen to emphasise that social workers should be people with life experience i.e. older people rather than younger people, and particularly those with children and “life experience”. This response reflected respondents’ faith in emotional strength and strength of personality, rather than academic qualifications. This belief was common amongst C2DE respondents in particular.

Respondents were keen to discuss what they felt were the ideal qualities for a social worker, and steered the discussion in this direction. It appeared that respondents were convinced that the calibre of social workers needed improving, and it was clear that media coverage had contributed to this view. Respondents were concerned that the mistakes highlighted by the media showed a need to improve the quality of social work candidates.

4.2.4 Who are social workers?

Media coverage had led respondents to assume that social workers were young (and often too young – e.g. social worker in the Anna Climbie case). However, there was also a broader perception (not specifically generated by the media) that social workers were from middle class backgrounds with a relatively high standard of education (i.e. degree level).

These perceptions had been drawn from an association between social workers and a particular social milieu. The picture generated was that social workers had hippy tendencies e.g. baggy clothes and liberal attitudes. People who had come into contact with social workers reinforced this view;

“They told us to sit on the floor and have a family meeting every week ... I mean really, anyone who knew my family knows that that is just not going to happen. I couldn’t stop laughing.” (Female, 25-49 years, C1C2D)

“Politically correct dipsticks with baggy trousers and lumpy jumpers.” (Male, 25-49 years, C1C2D)

Respondents’ vision was of young, overly idealistic people, not yet ready to deal with problems in the real world. They were considered well qualified, but sheltered; meaning well, but, on the whole, largely ineffective. Thus, at best social workers were considered laid back, at worst – “dopey”;

“It’s always females.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

“A bit school teachery.” (Male, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

“I think it’s quite special people who are drawn to that sort of work, who are prepared to put up with the sort of abuse they get and the salary and all the rest of it.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

“I’d say geeky.”

“Yes, a bit eccentric.”

“Yes, a bit like wearing red shoes and blue tights.” (Females, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

This view was predominant amongst male respondents and C1C2D respondents, who characterised social workers as “do gooders”. Respondents tended to feel that they themselves would be better candidates (although less well educated, considering themselves more grounded and street-wise);

“They tend to be naïve...from sort of middle class families, gone to college, learnt everything from a book.” (Male, 25-49 years, C1C2D)

A more positive view of why people would want to become social workers emerged from older BC1 respondents. They tended to feel that social workers genuinely cared, and were not predominantly motivated by salary. In this way they viewed social work very much as a vocation, not as a profession.

4.2.5 Attributes

Respondents discussed the following job attributes as they might pertain to the job of a social worker. The job attributes discussed were taken from a prior study: “Image of social work as a career” which was from “Monitor of nursing attitudes, RSGB, Taylor Nelson Sofres, 2000”.

The ability to rise to a challenge

Views as to what extent the ability to rise to a challenge were thought to be necessary depended on respondents’ view of social workers in general – whether they were “do gooders” or genuinely caring people. A majority thought that social work would be very challenging (even those who thought social workers were “do gooders” acknowledged that it was a tough job). A minority was convinced that social workers had a cushy time.

The ability to manage pressure

Most agreed that, as a tough job, social work would probably involve a lot of responsibility, long hours and lots of paperwork. Respondents acknowledged that social workers were often the decision-makers, and understood from media coverage that many were over-worked.

The ability to juggle a number of tasks and organisational skills

These were considered necessary skills since respondents understood that social workers had case loads, and therefore had to deal with several cases at once and co-ordinate different services for each.

Management skills

There was general uncertainty as to how important management skills would be. Respondents were unaware that social work was classed as a profession, and therefore

had very little idea of a career path or organisation structure. They tended to think of management skills in relation to managing a case-load, rather than managing people.

The ability to work as part of a team

Although they did not know for certain, the ability to work as part of a team was intuitively felt to be accurate. Some respondents had seen “case meetings” shown on television, and generally felt that co-ordinating services would involve other people.

Writing skills

Respondents assumed that social workers would need to account for their every decision, and therefore that paperwork would be onerous. Further, respondents assumed that computer literacy would be required.

Verbal skills, being a good communicator and generally being “a people person” -

These attributes were considered pre-requisites for the job, and were mentioned spontaneously by respondents as necessary in order to be a good social worker.

Decision making ability and doing more than thinking

Respondents certainly felt that social workers needed to make decisions, but were unsure how much of their role was “hands on”. Discussing this attribute led respondents back into uncertainty about what social workers actually did day-to-day.

4.2.6 What does social work offer?

Unsurprisingly, there was very little real knowledge of the terms and conditions of social work. Respondents made assumptions, based on their perceptions of the job.

A majority felt that social work would be an extremely demanding job, and to a large extent, “hard going”, given respondents’ perceptions of large case-loads of traumatic problems. Any successes were imagined to be few and far between, but would be satisfying.

“It could mean helping save some one’s life.” (Male, 25-49 years old, BC1C2)

The majority felt that social work would provide employment stability and security. This belief was based on the idea that social workers were very much in demand, and very much an official part of “the system”.

“Some one who has worked for the council for years has got quite a nice little number haven’t they?” (Female, 45-65 years old, BC1C2)

A majority also felt that the job, despite its demands, would command fairly poor pay. Many felt that salary levels would be similar to nursing. Perceived as “vocations” both nursing and social work were not felt to command competitive salaries. Respondents tended to feel that social workers were motivated by wanting to help rather than by financial reward.

A majority envisaged social workers working in a stressful environment. While team-work was envisaged, the majority of the job would be focussed on the individual dealing with problematic situations.

In terms of day-to-day working, respondents were very unsure about how varied case-loads would be, although they presumed there would be opportunities to specialise. However, they were unclear about how these opportunities might arise. They were also unsure how flexible working hours would be, for example whether social work could be undertaken on a part-time basis.

A majority were unclear as to whether social work could constitute a career. They did not immediately consider it a job with prospects for development or advancement. Although they felt one would need to have ambition and drive to find the job rewarding, they did not necessarily feel one would need to be a “high flyer”.

“You’d have your social workers, and then probably an area manager, but that would be about as far as you could go.” (Female, 18-24 years old, BC1C2)

A small minority of respondents (who had come into contact with social workers personally) had considered the profession, since they had felt they could do a good job of sorting out problems (and a better job than the social workers they had met). These people had been put off because they had assumed they were either too old or under-qualified. These respondents felt that they would make good social workers because they had “life experience” - as a mother and an ex-policeman.

The overwhelming majority did not express an interest in social work. Younger respondents had not considered social work previously, and their hazy perceptions were largely negative – a job of low status and unappealing conditions.

“My impression is that you might disappear down some street, into some house and maybe never come out again.” (Male, 25-49 years old, BC1C2)

BC1 respondents in particular were sure that this was not a job to which they would aspire, or encourage their children to aspire to. They felt that other jobs had better prospects, financial rewards and kudos. Ultimately, most felt that social workers were driven by their vocation, and their vocation alone.

4.2.7 Do social workers and social services do a good job?

As discussed previously, perceptions of how effective social workers were was influenced by both fact and fiction. Respondents tended to take their major cues from news reports. There were several cases mentioned when social workers involved had emerged badly.

“That big scare where they took all the children off the parents...” (Cleveland)(Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

“That case last year when the couple ran off with the two little girls and social services cocked it up big time.” (Cambridgeshire) (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

Direct experience with social workers (although few and far between) had created a poor impression. One respondent had called in social services when facing family difficulties. She did not feel they had helped. Another respondent had worked with social workers in a professional capacity (policeman), and felt that social workers proved ineffective when dealing with young offenders.

Respondents felt sure that social workers were employed by social services, but in turn were unsure who ran social services. They tended to talk very broadly in terms of “the system”, complaining about local authority responsibilities, but implicating social services at the same time, e.g. people waiting too long on the housing list. For example, there was particular concern about specific people i.e. ethnic minorities and single mums, receiving resources from “the system”. Respondents felt that they themselves perhaps would not receive such help. It was clear that respondents lacked understanding of the relationship between social services and local government, and who was responsible for different services.

Respondents blamed this vague notion of “the system” for restricting social workers in what they could achieve, presupposing a high level of guidelines and red tape. This attitude reflected respondents’ belief in a common sense approach for social work, and distrust of “political correctness” which they associated with social work. Media coverage had also reported how overworked social workers were, and respondents sympathised that a large case-load would inevitably make it difficult to pay ultimate attention to every individual case;

“I don’t think we’re disputing that there is badness in the world and I think social workers deal with it exceptionally well within the parameters that they’re given.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

Some respondents also blamed “authorities” for demanding too many qualifications to become a social worker, therefore putting up barriers to good (i.e. streetwise, experienced) candidates. This opinion was based on an assumption that many respondents (particularly from C2DE backgrounds) would not have the qualifications required, but would have valuable life experience to offer.

4.2.8 Recruitment – negative and positive factors

The elements of the social work profession which respondents perceived as off-putting included a perception that social work has a bad reputation (as they felt was portrayed by the media). In addition to the image of the profession, the image of the individual's case-load was also poor, with respondents assuming that there would be long hours required and certain periods on call;

“I’ve got two daughters and I would really not encourage them, unless it had been an over-riding desire for so many years. I don’t see it as a career for intelligent girls.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

“The others (teaching, nursing and police) are all professions aren’t they. They’re more recognised for what they do.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

When respondents considered how they would personally feel about contemplating a career in social work, they revealed concern about the effect that the job might have on them. They showed concern about dealing with abused children, and consequently “taking the problems home”. Ultimately, respondents perceived the social work role as dealing with problems and difficulties day in, day out;

“It would basically mean dealing with the dregs.” (Male, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

“I think it would change on a day-to-day basis wouldn’t it? Like one day it could be a nightmare and you would feel really guilty because you can’t help somebody and then the next your really happy because you have.” (Female, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

“So it must be a very bad job to do. The people that they’re representing kind of take their frustrations out on them.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

Respondents felt that it would be a difficult job to perform well in, particularly given the specific complications that might arise. For example they felt at times social work might jeopardise personal safety. They also felt it would be tough to maintain focus (e.g. if dealing with abusive parents), and to maintain morale (e.g. if helping people who did not necessarily want to be helped).

The rewards were, however, acknowledged. Respondents genuinely felt that social work would be a worthwhile occupation – socially useful and personally satisfying. These positive attributes were however, viewed as rather idealistic, and the drawbacks were all seen as very realistic.

One of the most influential (and realistic) off-putting factors was salary. Social work was generally perceived to offer a low salary and a lack of career opportunities, particularly when weighed against all the other problematic factors of the job;

“It’s a thankless task...more of a vocational thing.” (Male, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

4.3 Social Care

4.3.1 *Spontaneous associations*

Overwhelmingly, social care was associated with older people. Respondents' perceptions did not stretch much further than visualising social carers assisting the elderly with personal hygiene and household chores. When respondents imagined the tasks that a social carer would need to perform, they generally thought about unpleasant tasks involving illness;

“Caring for the elderly.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

“Cleaning up, washing up that sort of thing.” (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

“Ring and ride services or going around to people’s houses.” (Male, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

In contrast to social work, respondents had some personal experience of personal carers when helping with elderly relatives. They had been seen in a number of contexts – within the home, residential accommodation and day care centres. However, views about the tasks performed remained consistent across each of these settings;

“I’ve seen the positive side of carers, we had a social carer for my granddad who had cancer...I didn’t know there was such a thing.” (Female, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

In comparison to social workers, social carers were felt to be much more part of respondents' lives. There were instances of C2DE respondents knowing social carers socially (e.g. daughter, friend) as well as both C2DE and BC1 respondents knowing social carers in a work context (i.e. social carers looking after respondents' elderly relatives). In general, respondents felt a lot closer to social carers, and felt that social carers were more like themselves than social workers.

4.3.2 *What do they do?*

Social care was simply understood as “looking after people”. “Looking after” was generally interpreted as a “home help” catering for people’s basic needs. Typically a social carer was thought to cook meals, help with bathing and collect shopping and pensions. However, respondents did discuss the valuable role carers played in befriending the elderly (whilst completing these tasks).

“Just a back up, extra help for your everyday stuff.” (Female, 18-24 years old, C2DE)

“I just think of them as going in, making cups of tea and chatting a bit.” (Male, 25-49 years old, BC1C2)

This description of a social carer’s role did not broaden very much upon discussion. Family women had a certain amount of (albeit limited) knowledge of caring in other contexts. For example a minority had heard about help for people struggling to cope with several young children. Typically respondents took a dim view of this kind of help, feeling that people should be responsible for their own children, and that everyone struggled, but not everyone received help from social services.

Amongst family women there was some reference to social carers being employed by agencies other than social services e.g. private companies or voluntary groups. However, different employers were not felt to influence the role of a social carer. Thus a social carer role was perceived to remain the same whoever they were employed by.

“I know there are some agencies, like Leonard Cheshire.” (Female, 45-65 years old, BC1C2)

Respondents distinguished between their own caring roles (as parents or children) and social carers. Social carers were thought to deal with even more personal tasks than one would within a family e.g. emptying catheters and colostomy bags, washing false teeth. Thus the dominant perception of a social carer’s day-to-day tasks remained amongst the most unpleasant.

4.3.3 Skills and qualifications

As with social work, respondents clearly did not know what skills and qualifications were required to get a job in social care. When considered, respondents guessed that an applicant would need very few qualifications, simply a basic standard of education. Expectations of the skills and training needed to be a social carer were therefore quite low;

“I think it depends who they’re actually dealing with, because obviously if they’re dealing with autistic children they’ve got to have some sort of training.” (Female, 44-65 years, BC1C2)

“I think the training would be very basic. I think you’d just look for practical people who were looking for a fairly un-pressurised job.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

Again, as with social work, respondents preferred to think about people’s suitability for the job in terms of personal qualities rather than skills, training or qualifications. One of the main qualities required was considered to be a certain “toughness” – resilience both emotionally and physically. This assumption was a reflection of respondents’ view that social care work would be gruelling, e.g. involving lifting and generally manual tasks.

Additionally, respondents implicated a stoical personality in being able to do care work. This personality was typified as having patience, understanding, compassion and sensitivity. These qualities were felt necessary for dealing with personal care of the frail and elderly since clients were not perceived to be able to bring much to the relationship.

Trustworthiness was also considered essential for those working with vulnerable people in their own homes;

“Not be put off, some of the elderly can be very difficult.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

“Patience and you’ve got to want to do it.” (Female, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

“Chatty and friendly and more likely female.” (Male, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

Knowledge of any training required to become a social carer was also largely guesswork. Again, respondents concentrated on very basic skills e.g. first aid and possibly health and safety knowledge. On the whole however, any training needed was assumed to be “on the job” rather than a prerequisite.

4.3.4 Who are social carers?

Despite greater contact with social carers, respondents distanced themselves from the job itself. In reality, this was due to a perception that social care was a job suited for those with very low education attainment. However, the majority preferred to express the incompatibility between social care work and themselves as a question of vocation. On the whole, the majority were convinced that people were naturally disposed to becoming social carers (or not);

“You have to be that way inclined.” (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

“It’s got to be built in you.” (Male, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

Social carers were characterized as “salt of the earth” types – hard working, but likely to have few qualifications or skills;

“She’s a lovely girl, down-to-earth, a rough and ready type.” (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

The majority clearly felt that it was not “in them”. They resisted the idea of caring for strangers rather than family, and caring for ill people. As with social work, there was little or no perception of a client base with something to offer. Social care clients, like social work clients were thought to have overwhelming difficulties and problems.

Social carers were presumed to be women. Whereas it was admitted that there were probably some male social workers, respondents would not allow that any man would be

a social carer. Although it was agreed that men could be nurses, the role of a social carer was considered too domestic for a man to fulfil;

“It’s a women’s work, they do it generally.” (Male, 25-49 years, C1C2D)

Respondents were loath to admit this perception however, and preferred to feel that women were more “naturally” suited to social care work. Thus the male part of the sample felt that women’s predisposition towards care work was a reflection of women being able to do more flexible, short term contracts (to fit around family life) and being more habituated to tedious, domestic tasks. Thus social care was thought to provide an extra income rather than a main income;

“...it pays for extras like holidays.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

4.3.5 Attributes

Respondents discussed the range of attributes outlined below in relation to social care jobs. As previously, the job attributes discussed were taken from a prior study: “Image of social work as a career” which was from “Monitor of nursing attitudes, RSGB, Taylor Nelson Sofres, 2000”.

The ability to rise to a challenge

Generally it was felt that social care work would be challenging physically, and, over a long period of time, emotionally. There was a feeling that carers would become “worn down” by problems and unpleasantness over time. The job was not considered challenging intellectually. Within their perception of care work, respondents could not see how one could be challenged mentally.

The ability to manage pressure

It was considered necessary for a social carer to adapt to different circumstances (e.g. a deteriorating illness or a range of people with different problems). Similarly, social carers were regarded as ultimate “copers” – some one who could do the tasks the rest of us would prefer not to. Although these tasks might prove pressurising for the majority, social carers somehow managed. However, this type of pressure was perceived as different to the pressure of responsibility and decision-making that a social worker would need to manage.

The ability to juggle a number of tasks and decision making ability

Respondents agreed that smaller scale organisational and decision-making skills were necessary, as well as the ability to do several things at once.

“Not some one who fuffs.” (Male, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

However, care work was not perceived as strategic in any way, but an extremely focussed and targeted role. In this context, respondents could not see why a care worker would need to have a view of the bigger picture.

Management skills

Respondents could not imagine how management skills would be needed. In many ways social care was seen as the antithesis of a job in management. Respondents were thinking about individual care workers rather than the system as a whole when considering management skills. Once again, their perception of how care workers were organised was too hazy to allow them to comment on career development.

The ability to work as part of a team

Respondents found it impossible to comment on this attribute since there was simply no real knowledge about the structure of care work on a day-to-day basis.

Writing skills

Very basic literacy skills were thought to be necessary, for example if writing up a accident report. However the majority felt that care work was a “doing” job and would not require carers to put pen to paper routinely;

Verbal skills, being a good communicator and generally being “a people person”

These abilities were felt to be needed, but more informally than would be needed for a social worker. A social worker was imagined as some one who needed to get people to do things or agree to things. A social carer was imagined as some one who would use communication skills as a way of facilitating ordinary tasks e.g. bathing;

“It would be more about being a nice person.” (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

To be a good social carer, respondents felt one would need to be an ultimately caring person, and that this was the main motivation to becoming involved in care. Respondents could not understand why some one would become involved unless deeply caring – the job seemed to offer little reward for people not so inclined;

“You have to be a very special kind of person.” (Female, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

As with social work, respondents were keen to emphasise that social carers should be people with life experience (i.e. people over 30 who have had children and seen “real life”). Older men reiterated that women with children were the best candidates for this type of work, again based on their view of women as primary carers in life generally;

“They know how to look after the messy side of life.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

“They know how best to talk to the old folks.” (Male, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

4.3.6 What does it offer?

Getting a job in social care was perceived as fairly easy to accomplish. Respondents could not imagine that the profession was overcrowded, given their perception of a tough and unpleasant job;

“They’re probably crying out for people.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

Further, respondents found it difficult to imagine that anyone could remain a social carer long-term – again based on the perception that an unremitting client base of elderly, ill and problematic people would be demoralising;

“It would probably get you down.” (Male, 25-49 years, BC1C2)

Respondents did not imagine that pay would be commensurate with the level of hard work and commitment required. Many assumed an hourly rate, and thought of payment akin to cleaning for a living. This was another reason for presuming that social care was more suitable for families with an alternative “head of the household”;

“For running a car or whatever.” (Female, 25-44 years, C1C2D)

“I think of it as being a glorified cleaner.” (Male, 18-24 years, BC1C2)

However, social care was considered a relatively stable type of employment, particularly if working for social services. Respondents felt that there would always be a need for social carers, and that social services would probably make pension provision as an official organisation.

In terms of job satisfaction, fulfilment and variety, social care work was felt to be very rewarding only if you were “that type of person”. Respondents could not envisage a reason to aspire to social care work unless one was naturally drawn. They reported that care workers they knew very much enjoyed their work and felt that their clients provided variety.

It was perceived as a job suited to part-time or flexible working hours. This perception was fostered by the “type” of person considered appropriate for the job: family women needing hours to fit around their personal commitments. There was a prevalent perception that graduates would be wasted on social care;

“That’s way down the list of prospective careers.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

“Not much of a ladder to climb.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

4.3.7 Do social carers do a good job?

There was a consensus of opinion that social carers were invaluable. The warmth with which social carers were regarded individually did not extend to social services, who came in for more criticism. As social care as well as social work employers, social services were often thought to be providing help in unnecessary ways e.g. for people with lots of kids.

It was a firmly held view that those who were really in need were the elderly. Respondents remained committed to their perception that social carers were and should be looking after the elderly who were most deserving of their help. This view was based on the principle that the elderly had paid for their care in terms of their life long contribution to caring for other people.

There was some sense that being a social carer was an honourable profession, particularly because they were sometimes seen as doing the dirty work for social services (and the rest of society who wanted to provide for people, but not personally). Therefore, although respondents were very positive about social carers, they did not value social care as a career for themselves or their children;

“Unsung heroes I think.” (Female, 45-65 years, BC1C2)

4.3.8 Recruitment – positive and negative factors

Respondents found it very difficult to view social care in any other way but a poorly paid and dirty (but necessary) job. When thinking about doing the job themselves, respondents were even more put off by the idea of having deal with lonely and distressed people.

Although respondents thought about the positive aspects of the job, this was mostly in a theoretical sense, since the vast majority would not ever want to become a social carer. The only real advantage was perceived to be in knowing that one was being a really “good person”. In reality, the rewarding aspects of the job were only perceived to be for the committed few for whom it provided interest, variety and challenges.

Those respondents with personal experience of dealing with social carers (either for family/personal reasons) were more positive about the job. They recounted how carers felt involved and appreciated. Equally, much to the surprise of many respondents, they highlighted the fun and joy experienced through the variety of tasks and people met. However, respondents remained sceptical that they themselves could feel this way about a job as a social carer.

**J 946 PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL CARE
FOCUS GROUPS - DISCUSSION GUIDE**

- **Introduction**

*Introduce self, Research Works, plus the background to the research.
Explain confidentiality and recording.*

- Names, ages, family background
- Employment situation (past as well as current)

SOCIAL WORK

- **Tell me the first things you think of when I say**
 - Social Work
 - Social Worker

– **what are your immediate associations, impressions, images and beliefs?**
- Have you ever had **personal contact** with either
 - social work
 - social workers

(Probe: as a service user or contact with someone working in the field) *If so, discuss those experiences and the impressions which were created*

- What do you think that **social workers actually do**? Ask respondents to generate an outline of the overall role and responsibilities of a social worker
- What do you think that **social workers do on a day-to-day basis**? Ask respondents to generate an outline of the **typical working day** for a social worker
- What are the **types of skills** needed to be a social worker? **Probe** : type of person generally, personality, education/intelligence, age, gender, social class and any other specific strengths required
- Do you think that it would be **easy or difficult to become a social worker**? Why?
- What **qualifications and training** do you think are required? Would these be easy or difficult to **access**? Why?

- To what extent do you feel social work would require the following attributes:
 - ability to rise to a challenge
 - ability to manage pressure
 - ability to `juggle' a number of tasks or jobs
 - management skills
 - ability to work as part of a team
 - writing skills
 - verbal skills
 - good communicator
 - good organisational skills
 - empathy – a `people person'
 - decision making ability
 - doing more than thinking – practical skills

(Respondents to suggest any other appropriate attributes)
- What sort of person are social workers?
- Have you ever considered it yourself? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Why do you think one would choose to become a social worker?
- To what extent do you feel social work would offer the following:
 - good pay
 - security
 - job satisfaction
 - fulfillment
 - variety
 - flexible working hours
 - career development/advancement
 - a `high-flying' job environment
 - opportunities to specialise
- What **types of people** do social workers deal with? Generate typical examples of social work **clients**
- Who do social workers actually **work for**? Who is responsible for their **organisation and work practices**?
- How many social workers are **currently working in the UK** – do you imagine that there are plenty of staff, just enough or too few?
- Overall, do you think that social workers are doing a **good job**? Why/why not? What makes you say that?

- **Thinking back over your responses, where have these ideas and association come from? (Probe: personal experience, news media, TV/Radio, hearsay?) Do you believe all that you have heard? Why/why not?**

Recruiting

- Would you **encourage** a relative or friend to seek a career in social work? Why/why not?
- What would be the important positive factors involved in such a decision?
- What would be the important negative factors involved in such a decision?
- *To encourage future recruitment into social work:*
 - What aspects of a job in social work would you emphasise?
 - What aspects of a job in social work would be problematic?
 - How could these aspects be dealt with?
 - What aspects of a job in social work would be off-putting?
 - How could these issues be addressed?
- If you were putting together a recruiting message for social workers, what would it be? Respondents to generate a positive recruiting message

SOCIAL CARE

- *(UNPROMPTED)* Tell me the first things you think of when I say
 - Social Care
 - Social Carer
 - what are your immediate associations, impressions, images and beliefs?
- *(PROMPTED)* Explain the nature of social care and give some job titles – now respondents should again give immediate associations, impressions, images and beliefs
- Have you ever had **personal contact** with social carers? (Probe: as a service user or contact with someone working in the field) If so, discuss those experiences and the impressions which were created
- What do you think that **social carers actually do**? Ask respondents to generate an outline of the overall role and responsibilities of a social carer
- What do you think that **social carers do on a day-to-day basis**? Ask respondents to generate an outline of the **typical working day** for a social carer

- What are the **types of skills** needed to work in social care? Probe: type of person generally, personality, education/intelligence, age, gender, social class and any other specific strengths required
- Do you think that it would be **easy or difficult to get a job in social care**? Why?
- What **qualifications and training** do you think are required? Would these be easy or difficult to **access**? Why?
- To what extent do you feel social care would require the following attributes:
 - ability to rise to a challenge
 - ability to manage pressure
 - ability to 'juggle' a number of tasks or jobs
 - management skills
 - ability to work as part of a team
 - writing skills
 - verbal skills
 - good communicator
 - good organisational skills
 - empathy – a 'people person'
 - decision making ability
 - doing more than thinking – practical skills

(Respondents to suggest any other appropriate attributes)
- What sort of person are social carers?
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- What **types of people** do social carers deal with? Generate typical examples of social care **clients**
- Who do social carers **actually work for**? Who is responsible for their **organisation and work practices**?

- How many social carers are **currently working in the UK** – do you imagine that there are plenty of staff, just enough or too few?
- Overall, do you think that social carers are doing a **good job**? Why/why not? What makes you say that?
- **Thinking back over your responses, where have these** ideas and association come from? (*Probe: personal experience, news media, TV/Radio, hearsay?*) **Do you believe all that you have heard? Why/why not?**

Recruiting

- *Would you **encourage** a relative or friend to seek a career in social care? Why/why not?*
- **What would be the important** positive factors **involved in such a decision?**
- **What would be the important** negative factors **involved in such as decision?**
- *To encourage **future recruitment** into social care:*
 - What aspects of a job in social care would you emphasise?
 - What aspects of a job in social care would be problematic?
 - How could these aspects be dealt with?
 - What aspects of a job in social care would be off-putting?
 - How could these issues be addressed?
- If you were putting together a recruiting message for social care, what would it be? Respondents to generate a positive recruiting message
- **Summing-up – any other comments**