Social Work and the News Media

Entrenched assumptions, practice tensions and social workers’ professional identity

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (DR210)

Pushkar Sebastian Cordoba
BSW (Hons)

School of Global, Urban and Social Studies
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Pushkar Sebastian Cordoba
09/10/2016
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<td>Australian Association of Social Workers</td>
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<td>ABC</td>
<td>Australian Broadcasting Cooperation</td>
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<tr>
<td>BASW</td>
<td>British Association of Social Workers</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHCR</td>
<td>Centre for Health Communication Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>DCFS</td>
<td>Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services</td>
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<td>NASW</td>
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Abstract

There is a dominant idea within the social work professional community that the news media has consistently portrayed an unfairly negative view of the profession, focusing overwhelmingly on child protection failures. The literature on the topic suggests that the biased and critical coverage of the profession has been detrimental to workers and practice. While the relationship between social work and the news media has been the focus of writings in Australia, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Canada for almost seven decades, it continues to be a highly discussed, but poorly researched and understood topic. As a social worker, I have experienced the dominance of these ideas firsthand. Given the lack of research, the intent of the study was to explore the topic with a depth, rigour and reflexivity absent from most work.

Working with twenty practising social workers as co-researchers, the research project that informs this thesis sought to learn how the news media portrays the profession and how these representations affect social workers at a professional and personal level. This was done through a qualitative, social constructionist study where, over a twelve-month period, participants explored the issue and undertook a news media analysis in collaboration with myself as the researcher. The research project resulted in numerous insights that did not reflect the dominant assumptions within the professional community about negative reporting and its impacts on workers. At the conclusion of the twelve-month project the unexpected findings prompted further questions that dominated the latter stages of my analysis of the data. Mainly, given that the entrenched ideas about news coverage did not reflect what participants observed, can we better understand their dominance through the function that these views had for social workers? Central to this was the discovery of how participants used these beliefs to form and maintain their professional identity.

The analysis of how participants formed their professional identity throughout the research emphasised the function of the dominant views about news coverage. It became apparent that throughout the research process participants formed their professional identity within two alternating and contradictory subject positions. This was highlighted by the fact that for almost every participant when social work was discussed in general, the profession was deemed broad, ambiguous and hard to define, but when discussed in the context of the
news media, these struggles were not present and most reproached the news media for not being able to understand or define social work correctly. This contradiction represents significant shifts in participants’ subject positioning as social workers: from a tension-filled, contradictory and fragmented construction of social work that reflects what participants experience in daily practice, to a morally clear, unified and stable one when the focus is on the existence of unfairly negative news coverage.

It is theorised that the entrenched views about reporting play a significant function in negotiating and mediating the high degree of tension and conflict present in contemporary social work practice. As reported by participants, these tensions are primarily characterised by the dissonance between what social workers believe the profession should be about (social justice, human rights and liberators of the oppressed) and what they find it to be in their practice and organisational contexts (social control and managers of risk). Focusing on the existence of unfair media coverage as an external threat thus momentarily mediated these conflicts by positioning workers within a morally clear and seemingly stable, but highly problematic, sense of a professional identity. Dominant ideas about unfair reporting therefore became a tool with which social workers defused these tensions and temporarily displaced the ensuing dissonance, antagonism and possible conflict.

The thesis makes an innovative contribution to the scholarship by proposing that the profession’s beliefs about the news media may mediate the significant conflicts experienced by social workers in the formation of their professional identity. The findings possibly indicate that the profession’s fascination with its news media coverage may come at the expense of better understanding and negotiating the tensions, conflicts and contradictions of contemporary social work. It is proposed that in order to break the repetitive cycle of discussion on this topic, dominated by poorly substantiated claims that the news media is unfairly biased towards social work and suggesting better public-relation campaigns as a solution, a significant shift in focus could be required. This change involves a move away from the current defensive and reactionary position (that sees all negative coverage as unfair and does not look beyond social work to understand news creation processes and how other groups experience reporting), towards a more reflective and proactive approach (that is less insular in relation to news media coverage and its impacts, and seeks to balance an awareness of the profession’s public image with better understanding and articulating
what constitutes professional social work). Therefore, not only do the findings from this study contribute considerably to social work knowledge, they also present a revisioning for the way that the social work professional community understands and engages with the news media and its professional identity.
Introduction
Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

How the news media portrays social work and its impacts on practice has been an area of continued interest for social workers in the United Kingdom (UK), North America, Australia and New Zealand for almost seven decades (Aldridge 1994; Franklin & Parton 1991; Galilee 2005; Kelley 1953; Zugazaga et al. 2006). There is a dominant idea within the professional community that the news media has unfairly singled out social work, portraying a biased and negative view of the profession that focuses overwhelmingly on child protection failures (Aldridge 1990, 1994; Franklin & Parton 1991, 2001; Mendes 2001a; Zugazaga et al. 2006). On the other hand, there have been studies that have contested the validity of these strongly held beliefs (Aldridge 1990; Mawby et al. 1979). The writings on the topic, predominantly from the profession’s own press (or trade press), argue that negative reporting can have a detrimental impact on practice, client trust, worker confidence and the very future of the profession in its capacity to recruit new workers (DeLauro 2005; Franklin & Parton 1991; Galilee 2005; Gibelman 2004; Mendes 2001a; Zugazaga et al. 2006). Even though it is an issue of great focus, both locally and internationally (Franklin & Parton 1991; Galilee 2005; Mendes 2001a, 2008a; Olin 2013), there is a significant lack of academic research analysing how news media portrayals of the profession affect social workers and practice.

As a social worker I have experienced the dominance of these ideas within the professional community firsthand. In my early formative years as a social worker I came to understand the relationship between the profession and the news media as antagonistic. My previous experience as a writer for the media resulted in a particular interest in the relationship as I believed I had a deeper understanding of the news creation process. As a practitioner working in the trauma unit of a major paediatric hospital, I began to observe families’ reactions, including occasional looks of concern when I identified as a social worker. One family in particular revealed that they had assumed a social worker was sent due to protective concerns, although this was never an issue for consideration nor did the family have any history with child protection services. Seemingly confirming the dominant view, this situation raised my interest with regard to the relationship between patients’
understanding of the profession and what they read and see in the news. It was the culmination of these experiences and the subsequent review of the literature presenting a highly discussed but poorly studied topic that prompted my initial interest in researching it further.

In order to address a substantial gap in knowledge, this thesis presents the main findings from a qualitative study researching the relationship between social workers and news media portrayals of the profession in contemporary Melbourne, Australia. Working with twenty practising social workers as co-researchers, the research project that informs this thesis set out to better understand how the news media portrays the profession and how this affects workers at a professional and personal level. This was done through a social constructionist critical reflection process where, over a twelve-month period, participants explored the impacts and also undertook a news media analysis in collaboration with myself as the researcher.

This project initially highlighted how the dominant ideas and assumptions within the professional community and the literature did not reflect what participants observed during the research period or the media analysis. News coverage was found to be mainly absent and the limited reporting tended to be far more diverse and even positive. The absence of coverage became a central point of focus for participants as it identified a profession that was ignored, instead of being hated as assumed. This, however, did not change participants’ relationship with the news media as it continued to reaffirm the belief that it did not understand social work or its complexities. The impacts on practice were identified as being wide-ranging with several participants suggesting the absence of coverage contributes to larger issues regarding the low professional status that they experience. For most, any detrimental impacts did not extend beyond the early engagement stages of direct practice and personal experience was deemed to be a far more significant factor in shaping how clients understand social work. At the conclusion of the project these findings prompted major questions that were the central focus of the latter stages of my analysis. Mainly, given that the entrenched ideas did not reflect what participants observed, can we better understand their dominance through the function that they serve for social workers? Central to this was the discovery of how participants used the entrenched ideas about coverage to make sense of their own profession and identity.
An exploration of how participants formed their professional identity throughout the research process highlighted the role that the dominant views about negative reporting played. In the analysis of the findings it became apparent that participants were critiquing the news media for not being able to define or understand social work, something that when given the opportunity, they struggled with themselves. It is argued that this contradiction is evidence of significant shifts in subject positioning (in relation to their professional identity) that were occurring for participants during the research process. From a conflicted, contradictory and contested understanding of the profession when it was discussed in general, to a morally clear, more unified and stable one when discussed in the context of negative news coverage.

The thesis’ central claim is that the relationship between social work and the news media can be better understood by examining the effects that dominant beliefs about reporting have on the formation of social workers’ professional identity. From the research it is theorised that the dominant assumptions regarding reporting play a key role in the formation and maintenance of a highly problematic sense of a ‘clear and stable’ social work professional identity that momentarily mediates and negotiates the high degree of conflicts, ambiguities and tensions experienced by social workers in contemporary practice. By focusing on the existence of unfair coverage as an external and unifying threat, social workers were able to momentarily and problematically mediate the contradictions and definitional struggles that they experience. This tension is predominantly characterised by the dissonance between what social workers believe social work should be about (social justice, human rights and liberators of the oppressed), and what they find it to be in their jobs (social control and the management of risk).

The thesis makes a significant and original contribution to the literature and the professional community by theorising a novel approach for understanding the interaction between social workers and the dominant beliefs about news media coverage. It highlights how the profession’s fascination with its own news coverage has potentially come at the expense of better knowing and addressing the ambiguities, conflicts and contradictions of contemporary social work practice (Askeland & Payne 2001; Gray & Webb 2012; Payne 2005) and that a significant change in focus and approach is required. Therefore, the findings from this study contribute considerably to a reconceptualisation of the interaction
between social work and the news media and the components, processes and tensions that constitute social workers’ professional identity.

1.2 The literature

In exploring the literature, it becomes apparent that the relationship between the news media and social work has been an area of continued interest for the profession in English-speaking countries for several decades (Aldridge 1994; Franklin & Parton 1991, 2001; Galilee 2005). As early as the 1950s this area of inquiry has attempted to address larger questions regarding social workers’ professional identity and the social function of the profession. The majority of the writings come from the UK trade press and utilise research findings that rely on limited and methodologically unclear media analyses and online surveys (Galilee 2005; Lombard 2009). Critics of this view argue that the idea that the profession is under attack is entrenched within the professional community, seemingly unquestioned, as peer-reviewed research has found that beyond key incidents where the media potentially highlighted serious incidents of unethical practice, coverage has tended to be quite varied (Aldridge 1990, 1994; Andrews 1987; Mawby et al. 1979). Although there have not been any recent studies, there have been continued mentions in the literature raising concerns about social work’s fascination with its own media coverage (Warner 2015).

The absence of literature, internationally, that rigorously analyses the news media and how social workers are affected by the portrayals, parallels the scarcity of research into the topic in Australia. While it is commonly argued that news media reporting is unfairly critical and detrimental to workers in Australia (Mendes 2001a, 2008a; McIntyre 1981; Petre 1990), there is an absence of research that explores how such a key social institution shapes workers and practice. Although there are numerous references to the area of inquiry across the local literature and in the Australian Social Work journal and Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Bulletin (Hubka et al. 2009; Mendes 2001a, 2001b, 2008a, 2008b; McIntyre 1981; Petre 1990), the majority of the work tends to rely on limited UK and US (United States of America) findings. This is argued to be evidence of the existence of a dominant and taken-for-granted assumption in the Australian context about the degree of hostility shown to the profession by the media and its impact on workers.
The review of the literature presented a topic that dominated much of the discussion but lacked analysis. The intent of the research was to address this lack of knowledge and explore how news media portrayals of the profession shape social workers with a depth of inquiry and analysis absent from most work.

1.3 The research

The research sought to better understand the relationship between two central concepts: social work and the news media. Both are understood to be complex, intricate and highly diverse networks of individuals, groups and organisations within political socioeconomic contexts. The terms ‘social work’ and ‘news media’ are used here as convenient shorthand, whilst acknowledging their complexity that will be explored in greater depth throughout this research. Social work as a profession is understood to be a social construct created by numerous social agents and discursive elements responding to and being shaped by what is happening in the society in which it is performed (Payne & Askeland 2008). The news media, as a social construct, is understood to be a complex, mass network of sources of information, the majority of which are privately owned and a product of the socioeconomic and historical contexts it occupies (McCombs 2004; Ott & Mack 2009).

While there are many members of society conducting ‘social work’, which is work of a social and welfare nature, in social services and community welfare organisations, the focus here is on social work as a formally trained profession whose graduates are eligible for membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW 2013).

Several authors identify news media as an important social institution in the socialisation and democratic process and one of the main sites for meaning making, influencing the formation and expression of culture, politics and social life in the construction of the social world (Bell & Garrett 1998; Franklin & Parton 1991; Ott & Mack 2009). While there have been academic writings exploring the socially constructed nature of social work (Gray & Webb 2012; Payne 2005; Payne & Askeland 2008; Sheppard 2006) and news media’s role in the social construction of reality (Baran & Davis 2011; Ott & Mack 2009; Stocchetti & Kukkonen 2010), there is an absence of research that explores how news media affects the social construction of social work, which was a central focus of the research.
Therefore, this study set out to better understand:

What relevance do news media portrayals of social work hold for the social construction of social work?

1.4 The theoretical approach

The research draws primarily from the social constructionist tradition. Within this broad tradition, theoretical perspectives that have informed the thesis include Bergerian sociology (Berger et al. 1966–2011), critical constructionism (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002) and emergentist social constructionist theory (Edler-Vass 2010; Lewis 2010). Furthermore, social work perspectives influential to this thesis include constructionist (Parton & O’Byrne 2001; Witkin 2013) and critical (Allan et al. 2009; Fook 2002, 2012) social work.

Social constructionist theory is not a singular approach and despite common understandings, there are still significant ontological and epistemological debates between all the various conceptualisations that fall under this broad classification (Burr 2015; Gergen 2003). If there is one similarity across all approaches it is the claim that the way we talk and communicate about the world, also constructs it (Burr 2015; Elder-Vass 2012; Fook 2012).

Social constructionist approaches share a focus on language, communication, context, meaning making, identity and social interaction in order to understand how individuals and groups construct meaningful social realities (Burr 2015; Gergen 2003). By understanding how we experience reality as a social construct, this also encourages the development of a critical position towards taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world by ‘problematising the obvious’ (Holstein & Gubrium 2008; Parton & O’Byrne 2001, pp. 14–15; Zufferey 2008). Holstein & Gubrium (2008, p. 3) argue that social constructionist theory challenges the idea ‘that the world we live in and our place in it are not simply evidently “there” for participants. Rather participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements’. Furthermore, according to Bergerian sociology, human subjectivity is, during the course of social interaction, externalised and objectivated, and in turn objectivated knowledge becomes structuralised and acts upon and shapes subjectivity.
(Berger et al. 1963–2011; Lewis 2010; Sibeon 2004). Social constructionism’s focus on language, identity and context provided the necessary conceptual tools to not only explore how the profession is constructed in the news media, but also how this affects social workers in their meaning making and identity formation processes.

In order to study news media portrayals of social work and how they affect social workers, the thesis draws upon two key concepts from constructionist thought: discourse and subject positioning.

Social constructionist research prioritises the centrality of discourse in which language is understood to be a constitutive force, as objects of the world ‘are discursively produced’ (Witkin 2013, p. 27). The idea of discourse, a highly contested and debated term, is a key concept for this thesis that is influenced by a multi-theoretical stance drawing on aspects of Foucault (1972), Derrida (1976) and Berger & Luckmann’s (1967) work. Fook (2002 p. 63) defines discourse as the way ‘we make meaning of and construct our world through the language we use (verbal and non-verbal) to communicate about it’. Postmodernist, social constructionist and poststructuralist writers have further developed the idea of discourse that assumes that the ways we talk about the social world also construct it (Gergen 2003; Fook 2002; Witkin 2013). The thesis also draws upon the work of Laclau & Mouffe (1985) who propose that discourses fix meanings in particular ways through myths about society and identity, and exclude all other possibilities so that ‘the discursive constructions appear as natural and delimited aspects of reality’ (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p.186). As Fook (2002) writes, the power of dominant discourses is their ability to be seen as ‘truth’ and go unquestioned. The entrenched assumptions regarding the unfair news media coverage of social work are identified as a dominant discourse within the literature and the professional community.

Jorgensen & Phillips (2002) and Witkin (2011) argue that despite it being criticised for being a relativist approach, social construction is inherently a critical endeavour (belonging to the larger critical humanist tradition) as the theory attempts to destabilise dominant and naturalised systems of meaning. The unmasking and deconstruction of taken-for-granted discourses is regularly an explicit aim of constructionist research (Smith 1988; Witkin 2011; Wood & Middleman 2006). In these instances the critical project attempts to denaturalise...
and deconstruct the unquestioned understandings of reality, proposing that our interpretation of the world is always contingent and therefore can be changed and alternative ‘realities’ are possible, which are also contingent and up for debate (Fook 2002; Witkin 2011). Therefore, within a constructionist approach, the deconstruction of dominant assumptions (which in the case of this thesis refer to the relationship between social work and the news media) is argued to represent a critical research aim in its own right (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002).

In order to better understand the meaning making and professional identity formation processes of social workers, this thesis draws upon a social constructionist understanding of identity as subject positions within discourses (Burr 2015; Payne 2005). In social constructionist theory the notions of personality, and its fixed nature within modernist and psychodynamic understandings, is replaced with the idea of identity, subjectivity and subject positioning (Burr 2015; Harre & Davies 1990; Wetherell 1998). Identity is therefore seen as fluid, multiple and continually in process (Le Ha & Baurain 2011; Weedon 1987). Discourses provide a range of available and competing identities that make sense of the world, define the status of the individual and their ability to act within certain contexts. The focus is therefore on the process by which people adopt, resist and offer subject positions and identities that are made available in discourses (Gough, McFadden & McDonald 2013; Jensen 2011; Stenner 1993; Tuffin 2005). This approach gives greater emphasis to the use of language, as ‘the self’ is understood to be discursively produced through social communication and interaction (Davies & Harré 1990). It is important to note that even though identities are understood as being in continual states of change and tension, several authors argue that they have become increasingly fragmented and unstable ‘in late modernity as they are constructed across a number of contradictory and often antagonistic discourses’ (Hall & Du Gay 1996, p. 6; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002).

In line with its theoretical underpinnings, the research does not attempt to provide a universal truth or grand theory regarding the relationship between the news media and social work, or seek to establish causal relationships. As a social constructionist study, the thesis seeks to present a rigorous analysis of this topic offering a new conceptualisation in order to inform and contribute to public debate (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). The aim was not to produce findings that were fully generalisable, as this is inconsistent with this
tradition, but instead to produce new knowledge that may be of transferrable value and applicable to similar situations and contexts (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). A core tenet of this tradition is that as opposed to empiricism, human beings are unable to develop knowledge of the social world unaffected by concepts, theories and personal experience (Burr 2003; Gergen 2003; Witkin 2013). In line with the social constructionist underpinnings, it is acknowledged that this study is shaped by my assumptions as a researcher, as all observation is theory-laden, and therefore it is impossible to produce theory-free knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). As a researcher, I am an active agent and voice in this study. In doing so, this study utilises reflexive accounts (Haraway 1996) interspersed throughout to provide a clear account of my role as a researcher in the knowledge creation process, including focusing on how my assumptions have changed and my own subject positioning.

Constructionist theory provided the conceptual framework from which to understand the core concepts and develop the research design with specific attention paid to identity, language and the contextual nature of the research process.

1.5 The main aims

Building on the core theory, and in order to answer the research question, this study had three main aims:

a) to explore how news media portrayals of social work affect social workers at a personal and professional level
b) to document and analyse how social work is discursively constructed in the print and online news media
c) to develop new theoretical insights into the role of the news media in the social construction of social workers’ professional identity
1.6 The methodology

The methodology section of a research study is a fundamental component as it serves as the conceptual link between how it understands the social phenomenon that is the focus of inquiry and how to investigate it (Clough & Nutbrown 2012). The research question established two main and interconnected components: the micro social construction of social work and the macro discursive constructions of social work in the news media. In order to explore the relationship, two suitable methodologies, critical reflection (Fook & Gardner 2007) and discourse analysis (Phillips & Hardy 2002), were utilised that were consistent with the social constructionist and inductive underpinnings of the research. Broadly, both methodologies are understood to belong to a qualitative approach to research. As a collaborative and mixed methodological approach, critical reflection was used to explore how the news media affected workers at a micro level and in the process deconstructing dominant assumptions. Discourse analysis was used to analyse how the profession is constructed in the news media at a macro level. Both of these processes were then subject to further analysis through the combined use of critical reflection and discourse analysis in the theory development portion, exploring how participants were positioned within discursive constructions of social work when forming their professional identity in relation to the news media.

1.7 The research process

This study was conducted over approximately a three-year period and consisted of three interconnected sections (see research process flowchart below) each covering one of the research aims.
Section A:

**Aim:** a) to explore how news media portrayals of social work affect social workers at a personal and professional level

This section consisted of a twelve-month, three-stage, semi-structured critical reflection research project with a researcher-guided snowball sample of twenty practising social workers who shared an interest in the research topic. Fook (2002, 2012), Fook & Gardner (2007) and Morley’s (2008) three-stage approach (construction, deconstruction and reconstruction) to critical reflection provided the framework and theoretical basis for this process. Working collaboratively with social workers, the intent was to answer the research
question, and better understand the relationship by drawing in part on the participants’ practice insights, experience and observations during the process.

The stages were:

- **Stage 1: Critical reflection journal (Construction)**
  Research participants were given a journal and a single guiding question: What is the relationship between news media portrayals of social work and your social work practice? Social workers were given a three-month period to observe the news media and reflect on their practice in attempting to answer this question, documenting their thoughts, observations and practice examples.

- **Stage 2: Semi-structured interviews (Construction/Deconstruction)**
  Semi-structured interviews were conducted exploring two key questions: ‘What is social work in contemporary Melbourne, Australia?’ and ‘What is the relationship between news media representations of social work and your social work practice?’ Probing and critical questioning during the interviews sought to explore the full scope of the relationship beyond practice and the implicit assumptions in their accounts. Further questions were added to the journal that explored how the news media affected workers at a personal and professional level.

- **Stage 3: Group workshops (Deconstruction/Reconstruction)**
  The objective was to identify, through three three-hour group workshops, how assumptions have changed or been affirmed, how social workers can operate differently and explore new understandings and new approaches to practice (Fook & Gardner 2007).

The critical reflection data (submitted journals, interviews and workshops’ transcripts and media analysis findings) was coded by the researcher using a three-stage thematic analysis process (King & Horrocks 2010) in order to identify the main themes in relation to the research question and aims.

In line with the underlying constructionist theory, the findings that resulted from the process were in part understood to be the result of a situated encounter between the
The researcher and the participants, with a particular focus on the co-constructed nature of the knowledge produced. The interview and workshops are not seen as a means of obtaining an absolute truth about individual thought and experience. Rather, they are seen as a medium to create a co-constructed narrative between the interviewer and interviewee/s in which the way news media affected them and their practice was deconstructed and explored (Silverman 2011). The knowledge that is created as a part of this research is acknowledged to be the result of a situated encounter whose academic value is its transferability, not its generalisability.

Section B:
Aim: b) to document and analyse how social work is discursively constructed in the Melbourne print and online news media

The purpose of analysing the most accessed Melbourne print and online news media was to identify the dominant discursive constructions of social work that provide the macro discursive context of this research. The analysis was researcher-led and drew upon the contribution of the research participants who were exploring how the news media portrays the profession during the same twelve-month period as part of the research project. The media research component of this thesis analysed a total of 626 print and online newspaper articles (of which 459 were deemed relevant) over a twelve-month period (02/2013 to 01/2014) that mentioned the terms social work, social worker or social workers.

The analysis looked primarily at the four most accessed news sources in the Melbourne context (print and online), which included The Age & websites, Herald Sun & websites, The Australian & websites and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) news website. The news articles were coded and analysed according to ten definitional categories, with each section exploring a defining attribute and characteristic of the profession. Recurrent instances and frequency of content were analysed in order to determine the dominant constructions of the profession. The media analysis findings were presented during the critical reflection workshops and compared to participants’ own observations of the news media during the same period. Thematic analysis (King & Horrocks 2010) was used to identify the main themes in the data, which include both the research and participant media analysis.
Section C:

Aim: c) to develop new theoretical insights into the role of news media in the social construction of social work professional identity

In order to develop new theoretical insights regarding the relationship, participants’ formation of their professional identity during the research was analysed using Alvesson & Karreman’s (2007, 2011) method for theory development. Constructionist researchers Alvesson & Karreman (2007, 2011) have created a method for analysis that seeks to develop theory from qualitative data. While it shares some similarities with grounded theory, it varies greatly with a much larger emphasis on language, identity and discourse. A main goal of this analysis was to better understand the function that dominant discourses about negative coverage had for social workers in relation to how they made sense of their profession and themselves. The analysis looked within the empirical material that resulted from the research project (journals, interviews and workshops’ transcripts) for ‘breakdowns in meaning’ or contradictions in accounts (Alvesson & Karreman 2011). These contradictions are argued by the authors to potentially be evidence of larger processes at play that may be of significant theoretical interest. The authors suggest that if existing theory does not adequately explain the inconsistencies, then this creates a clear opportunity for theory development, which may then be of transferrable value to the broader scholarship on the topic. The use of the framework assisted in the development of theory by focusing on the significance of the ‘breakdowns in meaning’ that were present when participants explored their understanding of social work in general and in relation to the news media.

1.8 The findings

The following section outlines the findings in two parts: in terms of the main insights from the critical reflection and media analysis, and in terms of the theoretical contribution and main argument of this study. Although participants are identified as co-researchers at different stages of the research, especially during the media analysis, in line with the constructionist underpinnings of this study the arguments presented here are ultimately that of the researcher, as it is my analysis and interpretation of the data that will be explored.
The findings: Critical reflection and media analysis

The main findings from the critical reflection research project and media analysis did not reflect the dominant assumptions regarding news coverage and its impacts. The twelve-month critical reflection process with the twenty social workers resulted in an alternate understanding of the relationship, which included several unique insights characterised by the central idea that coverage is not necessarily unfairly critical, but rather absent. This reflected the findings from the researcher-led media analysis that also showed that although social work coverage was lower than comparable professions, the existing reporting constructed the profession as being highly diverse in both fields of practice and demographics. Participants’ reflections on the relationship between news media and practice was shaped by this discovery and led to several insights of relevance to the research question and aims. The discussion about the impacts of coverage identified larger themes for participants regarding societal attitudes towards the profession, whose purpose and ability they believed is not understood and therefore questioned. The confusion from clients and co-workers concerning the function of social workers, beyond protective services, was the most significant impact as the lack of coverage was argued by participants to contribute to a general sense of misunderstanding. For most, the detrimental impacts did not extend beyond the early engagement stages of direct practice and were easily addressed. Also, personal experience was deemed to be a far more significant factor in shaping how clients understand social work.

A major discovery for participants during the process was that the lack of client trust stemmed not necessarily from the assumption that workers are ‘going to take the kids away’, as argued in the literature, but that the lack of coverage leads to clients and co-workers questioning the professional competency of workers. Participants identified the absence as being representative of the low professional status that social work holds. Although rare, receiving media scrutiny of individual practice was reported as being a challenging experience whose impacts were not long lasting. The more destructive elements were the organisational responses to news reporting that created a toxic work culture of anxiety, risk aversion and recrimination. The reflection process highlighted for most participants the limited impacts on daily practice, but identified larger issues regarding social work’s deprofessionalisation, general confusion and its low professional status.
The insights from the critical reflection process did not dramatically change participants’ relationship with the news media as it continued to reaffirm the view that it did not understand social work or its complexities, through indifference rather than hatred.

**The findings: Theory development and the professional identity**

The critical reflection process and media analysis resulted in numerous insights. While the research project findings are of interest and importance in their own right, the most significant discovery was the discord between what social workers assumed would be the findings and what they observed. This inconsistency was the focus of the latter stages of analysis and necessitated further inquiry as, if the dominant views about reporting did not reflect the findings from the research project: can we better understand their dominance by identifying the function that these ideas served for social workers? Central to this was the discovery of how participants used these entrenched views to make sense of their own profession and professional identity.

An exploration of how participants formed their professional identity throughout the research process emphasised the mediating and negotiating function of these dominant views. In analysing the critical reflection process using Alvesson & Karreman’s (2007, 2011) framework for theory development, it became apparent that participants’ social work identity was formed within two alternating and contradictory subject positions. This was highlighted by the fact that for almost every participant, when social work was discussed in general, the profession was deemed broad, contradictory and hard to define, but when discussed in the context of the news media, these struggles were not present and most reproached the news media for not being able to understand or define social work correctly. This ‘breakdown’/inconsistency is identified as being evidence of the shifts in participants’ subject positioning that were occurring when social work was discussed in relation to the news media. The shift was significant as it momentarily mediated the high degree of conflict, ambiguity and contradiction experienced by participants in their daily practice.
It is argued that participants occupy a contested and highly debated professional culture (Askeland & Payne 2001; Gray & Webb 2012; Payne 2005). Understanding social work and the professional identity as a social construct accepts that it is ambiguous, contested and responds to social and cultural contexts (Payne 2005). As Askeland & Payne (2001, p. 14) write, from its origins ‘social work has always been subject to competing claims of definition and practice, as social workers, politicians, service users and policy makers have struggled to lay claims on what social work is, and what it might be’. These definitional struggles have shaped the profession and are influenced by the ‘debates, disputes, and sometimes irreconcilable tensions within the field of social work and beyond’ (Gray & Webb 2012, p. 5). These tensions have been characterised by the twin logics of regulation/control and security/care that have historically constituted most forms of professional social work (Camilleri 1996; Fook 2002; Gray & Webb 2012). Participants’ professional identity is understood to have been formed within this cultural context. Therefore, it is in a constant and formative state of tension between all the different elements (further developed theoretically in Chapter 2 and identified as ‘domains’) that constitute it. It became evident that when discussing ‘What is social work?’ during the interview stage, this tension could become highly antagonistic for workers given the degree of conflict, fragmentation and ambiguity present in contemporary practice.

The tension became seemingly paralysing when the focus centred on the dissonance between what they believe social workers to be (‘liberators of the oppressed’) and what they do (social control and management of risk). This led to an antagonistic sense of a professional identity as this contradiction made workers question the point of practice if it is decidedly contrary to its goals. As shown in Figure 2 (p. 22), these contradictions and tensions were momentarily and problematically resolved when participants’ focus was on the existence of unfair news coverage.
When the discussion focused on the news media, participants disconnected from the definitional and identity struggles that they faced earlier in the research process and adopted a problematic ‘clear and stable’ social work professional identity where all the different domains were no longer at odds with each other but in unison and under attack. It is argued that through the use of ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies, as understood from a constructionist paradigm (Gough, McFadden & McDonald 2013; Jensen 2011; Krumer-Nevo 2012), participants formed a fraught and momentarily ‘clear and stable’ professional identity in relation to the news media. These strategies included ‘self-othering’ processes as participants self-identified as the ‘other’ being oppressed by a larger and dominant societal force; and projection processes as the critiques which they held towards the profession were dissociated from and attributed to the news media as a form of unfair criticism. The use of these projection strategies positioned them within a unified, clearly defined and morally just professional group that is unappreciated, unfairly critiqued and misunderstood by the news media, along with the broader society (see Position B in Figure 2).
The reactive ‘clear and stable’ professional identity adopted by participants in relation to the news media was fraught and precarious. This is identified as being problematic because as the research process highlighted: it constructed social work as a unified group within an acontextual and uncritical higher moral ground; it does not reflect what this and other studies have found regarding coverage; and did not engage with or even acknowledge the degree of conflict and tension experienced by participants in contemporary practice. All three points are underscored by a significant lack of critical reflection with these entrenched and taken-for-granted ideas. Therefore, this discourse is deemed problematic given how influential it is to social work identity formation, yet seemingly limited of self and contextual reflexivity.

It is important to note that this thesis does not propose that social workers need a clear and stable sense of a professional identity from which to practice, as this would contradict a constructionist understanding of identity and the continuously constructive (and tension-filled) processes of the ‘relational self’ (Burr 2015). Rather, that the degree of tensions and contradictions experienced by workers has led to a highly conflicted and dissonant sense of a professional identity (Hall & Du Gay 1996; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). The aim is to better understand, engage and negotiate these tensions, not resolve them, in order to develop a more reflective sense of a professional identity.

The significant theoretical contribution of this study can be evaluated for its value and applicability to other contexts. This thesis adds further credence, expansion and a contemporary expression to the ideas formulated by Aldridge (1990; 1994) that identified the existence of a dominant and possibly unsubstantiated assumption within the professional community about the degree of negative coverage. It is theorised that the dominant and entrenched views about the news media within the profession’s culture have allowed workers to mediate the potentially paralysing contradictions and struggles that they experience in practice by markedly focusing on the existence of an external threat. It is proposed that in order to break the repetitive cycle that has dominated discussion on this topic characterised by poorly substantiated claims that the news media is unfairly biased towards social work, and suggesting better public-relation campaigns as a solution, a significant change in focus is required. This change requires a move away from a defensive position that sees all negative coverage as unfair and does not look beyond this to
understand news creation processes and how other groups experience reporting. And further, it requires a more reflective and proactive approach that is less insular in relation to news media coverage, and seeks to balance an awareness of the profession’s public image with a greater appreciation of the complexities of professional social work. A significant conclusion of this study is that the profession’s fascination with its news media coverage has come at the expense of a better understanding and negotiation of the tensions and contradictions of social workers’ professional identity and contemporary practice.

Accordingly, this study makes a substantial contribution to the Australian social work professional community by proposing a new approach for understanding the interaction between social work and the news media that focuses on greater reflection and engagement with the complexities of social work and its professional identity. In doing so, it also creates a clear opportunity for a revisioning and reconceptualising of how the social work professional project understands the news media and itself.

1.9 The structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into three main parts, plus an introductory and concluding chapter. Part One provides a conceptual framing, overview of the literature and design that formed the foundations of this study. This includes an exploration of the theoretical framework (including the main concepts and further developing a constructionist understanding of ‘social workers’ professional identity’), a review of the literature, the research strategy, the methodology, methods, research sites and an exploration of the limitations of the research. Part One concludes, as will every part, with a reflexive exploration of my role as a researcher in the knowledge creation process, with a particular focus on the shifts and developments of my professional identity as a social work practitioner and researcher.

Part Two presents the co-constructed knowledge that resulted from the critical reflection process and media analysis. This will be presented according to the four overarching themes identified through the thematic analysis (King & Horrocks 2010) of the journal, interview, workshop and media analysis data including: the news media’s coverage of the profession; the impacts on practice; the effects on their professional identity, self-confidence and self-worth; and the reconstruction of knowledge and practice. Part Two will begin by exploring
the findings from the researcher and participant media analysis, analysing the dominant discursive constructions of social work. Then it will consider what participants reported to be the broader explanatory factors regarding the media coverage, including newsworthy criteria and the deprofessionalisation of social work. The analysis will then focus at an interpersonal level on how participants identified that the news media impacts clients, direct practice, co-workers and the broader organisational contexts. Furthermore, it will explore the impacts by discussing how participants reported that coverage affects them at an intrapersonal level. This section will conclude with the presentation of participants’ reconstructed knowledge and approaches to practice that resulted from the critical reflection process, including the identification of new opportunities for action. As a common approach within qualitative studies, in this section the findings and discussion are integrated (Holloway & Brown 2012; Flick 2013).

Part Three presents the main theoretical contribution of this thesis. This section builds on the main insights from Part Two and explores the role that the dominant ideas about news media coverage have in the formation and maintenance of social workers’ professional identity. This will be done initially by exploring how the research process itself was a significant site for identity and reality maintenance and the implication for participants’ social work identity. It will then present the ‘breakdowns’ and contradictions in participants’ accounts and through the use of interview and workshop data demonstrate how they are evidence of shifts in subject positioning. This will include discussing their significance in relation to the formation and maintenance of their social work professional identity. Additionally, it will discuss how the sense of a ‘clear and stable’ professional identity was problematic and did not engage or address the underlying tensions.

The thesis concludes with a final chapter that provides an overview of the main arguments and the contribution of these understandings. Initially this will be done by answering the research question: What relevance do news media portrayals of social work hold for the social construction of social work? Then it will discuss how the thesis creates a revisioning and new approach for the social work professional project in the Australian context. This will be explored in relation to the contribution this thesis makes to: social work knowledge, social workers, social work education and social work professional groups. The thesis concludes with recommendations for future research and the final reflexive piece.
1.10 Conclusion

As a social worker, it became apparent from very early on in my career that the professional community had a major interest in its own media coverage. The literature and general debate seemed to be informed by the dominant idea that the news media has consistently portrayed an unfairly negative view of the profession, focusing overwhelmingly on child protection failures. Despite the significance, there is a lack of research on the topic. The thesis makes an original contribution by proposing that the profession’s entrenched assumptions about news coverage lack reflexivity and possibly mediate the high degree of conflict experienced by social workers in the formation of their professional identity. The findings indicate that the profession’s fascination with its news media coverage may come at the expense of better understanding and negotiating the tensions and contradictions of contemporary social work, and a shift in focus is required towards a more reflective, proactive and less insular approach. Therefore, not only do the findings from this study contribute considerably to better informing the profession’s understanding of the relationship between social work and the news media, they also provide a new way forward for engaging with the complexities of being a social worker.

The introductory chapter has provided an outline of the research and the main arguments. After an introduction, Part One will commence with Chapter 2 that presents the theoretical approach and understandings involved in defining and researching the relationship between social work and the news media.
Part One: Theory, literature and design
Part One: Introduction

Part One presents the theoretical paradigm, literature review and research design that formed the foundations of this study. This includes an exploration of the underlying theory, the key concepts, the research gap, the research strategy, the methodology, methods, research sites and the continuing reflexive analysis of my role, identity and positioning within the research process.
Chapter 2: Theoretical approach

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the theoretical approach that forms the foundations of the thesis. This will include identifying the paradigm, conceptual framework, and from this a theoretical framing of how this study understands ‘social workers’ professional identity’ and ‘the news media’.

2.2 Paradigm: Social constructionism

This study is informed primarily by the social constructionist tradition. As Gergen & Gergen (2008, p. 461) argue, social construction ‘refers to a tradition of scholarship that traces the origin of knowledge, meaning or understanding to human relationships’. Social constructionism is a highly diverse and contested field of knowledge (Burr 2015; Gergen 2003; Holstein & Gubrium 2008; Witkin 2011). Despite the great deal of diversity, there are shared features regarding understandings of the social world that all approaches within this broad umbrella term share. In attempting to provide a definition, Elder-Vass (2012, p. 4) argues that:

If there is one claim that is definitive of social constructionism, it is the argument that the ways in which we collectively think and communicate about the world affect the way the world is. But social constructionism is not a single synthesis; rather, there are a range of social constructionisms, each striking a different balance between traditional sociological arguments and postmodernist innovations.

Holstein & Gubrium (2008, p. 3) argue that social constructionist theory challenges the idea ‘that the world we live in and our place in it are not simply evidently “there” for participants. Rather participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements’. In order to understand how individuals and groups construct meaningful social realities, social constructionism focuses on language, communication, context, meaning making, identity and social interaction (Burr 2015; Gergen 2003).

Furthermore, in understanding how we experience reality as a social construct, it also
encourages the development of a critical position towards taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world by ‘problematising the obvious’ (Holstein & Gubrium 2008; Parton & O’Byrne 2000, pp. 14–15; Zufferey 2008).

In order to understand how individuals and groups make sense of their reality, social constructionist theory epistemologically prioritises the centrality of discourse. Language is understood to be a dominant macro structure and viewed as a constitutive force as ‘objects of the world are discursively produced’ (Witkin 2013, p. 27). Language and communication are the primary medium of reality construction and seen to create phenomenon, instead of simply being a transparent vehicle that reflects it. A core tenet is that as opposed to empiricism, human beings are unable to develop understandings of the social world unaffected by concepts, theories and personal experience (Burr 2003; Gergen 2003; Witkin 2013). In relation to the research process, from a constructionist viewpoint all social inquiry reflects the assumptions of the researcher, as all observation is theory-laden and therefore it is impossible to produce theory-free knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln 2005).

In order to research how news media constructions of the profession affect social workers, this study draws upon recent advances in social constructionist theory to provide an epistemological basis for the methodology and methods. As a key tradition within constructionist theory, Bergerian sociology’s (Berger et al. 1963–2011) understanding of the social world was influential in the development of this research. According to Bergerian sociology, human subjectivity is, during the course of social interaction, externalised and objectivated, and in turn objectivated knowledge becomes structuralised and acts upon and shapes subjectivity (Berger et al. 1963–2011; Lewis 2010; Sibeon 2004). ‘Actors’ meanings in micro settings, when repeated and objectivated across time and space in effect become the macro-social world via a process that Berger & Luckmann (1966) describe as the social construction of reality’ (Sibeon 2004, p. 61); however, once it has been constructed the macrostructure enters back into the micro-sphere and shapes the consciousness, identity and the actions of individuals and groups.
As Berger & Luckmann (1966, p. 4) state:

It is through externalisation that society is a human product. It is through objectivation that society becomes a reality *sui generis*. It is through internalisation that man (sic) is a product of society.

This process has been occurring for as long as humans have been social and therefore we are born into objectivated discursive structures with limited subject positions that form the basis of socialisation. Berger & Luckmann (1966, p. 149) argue that in researching the social construction process, ‘society and each part of it are simultaneously characterized by three moments (externalization, objectivation and internalization), so an analysis in terms of only one or two of them falls short’. Furthermore, in arguing for the duality of agency and structure, Berger & Berger (1976, p. 18 in Sibeon 2004) propose that ‘the micro-world and what goes on within it only makes full sense if it is understood against the background of the macro-world that envelopes it, conversely the macro-world has little reality ... unless it is repeatedly represented in the face to face encounters of the micro world’. The authors claim that the social construction process largely consists of objectivated macro discourses and internalised/externalised micro subjectivities and inter-subjectivities (Sibeon 2004; Lewis 2010).

Critics have argued that in his attempt to provide an account of both the subjective and objective structural dimensions of society, Berger overemphasised the subjective at the expense of the objective. In doing so, Berger follows mutually exclusive theoretical strategies that collapse the difference between subjectivity and structure while arguing for the autonomy of structures from subjectivity (Sibeon 2004, p. 63). Lewis (2010) writes that critics (including Sibeon 2004) have focused on Berger’s explicit, meta-theoretical ontological pronouncements about the nature of the social world as written in his and Luckmann’s seminal text *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966), whilst ignoring the more elaborate epistemological account of the agency-structure relationship that is presupposed by his extensive research. Based on Berger’s body of work, Lewis (2010) understands the micro and macro realm as emergent properties with causal powers, and that these powers interact to produce meaning that guides human activity, which he describes as emergent entities.
As opposed to Berger & Luckmann (1966), Lewis (2010) proposes that macro discursive structures are ontologically irreducible to human agency, mainly because the structures are the bearers of emergent causal powers (Elder-Vass 2010; Lewis 2010; Wahlberg 2013). Also, macro structures are always constituted at least partly by individuals, but such structures may have causal powers that are different from those of their individual human components (Lewis 2010). In line with ‘emergentist social constructionist theory’ (Lewis 2010) and Bergerian sociology (Berger et al. 1963–2011), human knowledge and action is comprised centrally, but not exclusively, of a duality of macro-discursive and micro-subjective elements with varying degrees of influence and determination in the social construction process. Lewis’ (2010) contribution to the development of constructionist theory has already been recognised by several authors (Elder-Vass 2010; Nizigama 2011; Pratten 2013).

The aim of this research was to explore the role of news media portrayals of the profession in the social construction of social work. In accord with the theory, this needed to be understood at both a macro and micro level because it is the interplay between the two that in part constructs social work. Burr (2003) writes that macro and micro versions of social construction should not be seen as mutually exclusive, as there is no reason why they should not be brought together in a synthesis of micro and macro approaches. Danziger (1997) and Wetherell (1998) also call for a combined approach arguing that we need to understand the situated nature of accounts as well as the social structures within which they are constructed.

This study makes a significant contribution to this field by proposing a research design that can explore both domains in the social construction process.

2.3 Critical constructionism

Jorgensen & Phillips (2002) and Witkin (2011) argue that despite it being critiqued for being relativist, social construction is inherently a critical endeavour as the theory attempts to destabilise dominant and naturalised systems of meaning. As Jorgensen & Phillips (2002, p. 178) write, ‘an important discourse analytical aim is to unmask and delineate taken-for-granted, common-sense understandings, transforming them into potential objects for
discussion and criticism and, thus, open to change. Influenced by the works of Derrida (1976), the unmasking and deconstruction of taken-for-granted knowledge is regularly an explicit aim of constructionist research (Burr 2015; Smith 1988; Witkin 2011; Wood & Middleman 2006). In these instances, the critical project attempts to denaturalise and deconstruct the unquestioned understandings of reality, proposing that our interpretation of the world is always contingent and therefore can be changed and alternative ‘realities’ are possible (Fook 2002; Witkin 2011). Witkin (2011) argues that questioning the taken-for-granted is a fundamental part of social construction theory. Drawing upon Foucault’s notion of ‘problematisation’, the author suggests that constructionist research needs ‘to not take for granted what is taken for granted, but to treat such beliefs and assumptions as ways of understanding that have gained a status that renders them relatively impervious or invisible to traditional analysis’ (Witkin 2011, p. 31). Therefore, within a constructionist approach, the unmasking and deconstruction of dominant assumptions, which in the case of this thesis are with regard to the relationship between social work and the news media, is argued to represent a critical research aim in its own right (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002).

More broadly, Giddens (1993) claims that all social research is inevitably critical and anthropological as it ‘requires immersion in a form of life’ by which the social researcher aims to better understand the focus of inquiry ‘within the metalanguage of social science’ (Blaikie 2007, p. 163). In doing so, social research has the potential to foster structural change by challenging or undermining the ability of dominant groups to promote a singular construction of reality as the correct one (Blaikie 2007; Giddens 1984). Therefore, the constructionist research process is inherently critical and structural analysis is implicit in the process, although it may not necessarily be an explicit aim (Blaikie 2007).

In order to study the relationship between news media coverage and social workers, the thesis draws upon two key concepts from constructionist thought: discourse and subject positioning.
2.4 Discourse

The idea of discourse, a highly contested and debated term, is a key concept for this study that is influenced by a multi-theoretical stance drawing on aspects of Berger & Luckmann (1966), Foucault (1972) and Derrida’s (1976) work. Postmodernist, social constructionist and poststructuralist writers have further developed the idea of discourse that assumes that the ways we talk about our reality and the frameworks used for understanding our social worlds also construct them. Fook (2002 p. 63) defines discourse as the way ‘we make meaning of and construct our world through the language we use (verbal and non-verbal) to communicate about it’. Discourses are expressed beliefs and ideas that are situated within social, institutional and cultural practices, and particular forms of subjectivity that constitute ‘the bodies and feelings of individuals’ (Burr 2015; Fook 2002, p. 64). Discourses become dominant through repetition in several mediums, including the news media, and as certain groups benefit from them (Sterk & Knoppers 2009). The power of dominant discourses is their ability to be seen as ‘truth’ and go unquestioned (Fook 2002; Witkin 2011).

Foucault (1972, p. 49) argues that discourses ‘are practices which form the objects of which they speak’. Foucault (1972) regarded ‘discourse as social structure, and discursive practice as social practice’ (Diaz-Bone et al. 2008, p. 1). This is understood by this study to represent that objects and events in the social world come into existence as meaningful entities through their representation in discourses (Burr 2015). Therefore, constructionist research prioritises the centrality of discourse in all forms of analysis. As Hall (2001, p. 72) wrote, discourses ‘constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others’. As detailed previously, this thesis is also influenced by the work of Derrida (1976, p. 163) whose contentious assertion that ‘there is nothing outside the text’ captures the central assumption of a constructionist understanding of discourses and the central focus on language. It is important to note that this does not negate the existence of a material world, but instead, that our engagement with this world is dependent upon the meaning that discourses give.
In further developing the theoretical tradition, the thesis draws upon the work of Laclau & Mouffe (1985) who have contributed to social constructionism through the use of discourse theory to further theorise what constitutes macro-structures. The authors propose that through the hegemonic practices of discourse, reality appears as natural, and therefore non-contingent. They argue that discourses fix meanings in particular ways, excluding all other possibilities, and through myths about society and identity ‘the discursive constructions appear as natural and delimited aspects of reality’ (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 186). Laclau & Mouffe (1985) also propose the challenging of ‘hegemonic closures’ through deconstruction in order to demonstrate, that ‘which we see as objective and natural are, in reality, contingent combinations of elements which could always have been articulated differently’ (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 186). The work of Laclau & Mouffe (1985) helps to better understand the processes by which discourses in relation to news media coverage become dominant within the professional community and how they can be deconstructed.

In summary, this study understands news media and social work discourses as being the product of externalisation and objectivation resulting in emergent properties with their own causal powers that are not merely the sum product of subjective experience, interpretation and action. These discourses are seen as structures that construct social work as a profession, defining, creating and also limiting the capacity for action.

In order to better understand the relationship between discursive constructions of the profession in the news media and social workers’ professional identity, this thesis draws upon the constructionist concepts of subjectivity and subject positioning.

2.5 Identities as subject positions in discourses

In social constructionist theory, the notions of personality, and its fixed nature within psychodynamic understandings, are replaced with the idea of subjectivity, which is generally identified as the processes by which identities are produced (Burr 2015; Wetherell 1998). In a challenge to the fixed ideas of personhood and role proposed by traditional psychology (Gough, McFadden & McDonald 2013; Jensen 2011; Stenner 1993; Tuffin 2005), discursive psychologists further refined Berger’s work by developing the concept of positioning to refer to the process by which people adopt, resist and offer subject positions that are made
available in discourses. Identity is therefore seen as fluid, multiple and continually in process (Phan & Baurain 2011; Weedon 1996). This approach gives greater emphasis to the use of language and meaning within discursive contexts as the identities are understood to be discursively produced through social communication (Davies & Harré 1990). As Willig (1999, p. 114) writes, ‘individuals are constrained by available discourses because discursive positions pre-exist the individual whose sense of “self” (subjectivity) and range of experience are circumscribed by available discourses.’

Combining elements of poststructuralism and interactionism, social construction theory understands identity as both a product of discourses and as a resource for ‘accomplishing social actions in talk-in-interaction’ (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 110). Discourses provide a range of available subject positions and identities that define the individual and their ability to act within that context.

As Davies & Harré (1999, p. 35) write:

A subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire. Once having taken up a particular position as one’s own, a person inevitably sees the world from the vantage point of that position and in terms of the particular images, metaphors, storylines and concepts which are made relevant within the particular discursive practice in which they are positioned.

The ‘other’ is identified as a vital part of the positioning process as subject positions are always jointly produced, reproduced and relational in that the adoption of a position always assumes ‘a position for the interlocutor’ (Andreouli 2010, p. 145; Harré & van Langenhove 1998; Harré & Moghaddam 2003). A constructionist understanding of ‘othering’ will be explored in greater depth in Part Three of this thesis and in relation to the identity formation processes adopted by participants.

Positioning is intrinsically linked to discourse theory as discourses provide a range of subject positions that people adopt in social interaction and these positions shape people’s sense of identity and social interaction (Avdi 2011; Parker 1992). As hegemonic discourses exert
power, they have significant effects on how people experience the world and themselves (Parker 2005). Positioning theory provides a set of conceptual tools in order to study the relationship between subjectivity and discourse, and in doing so explore the interlinking between culture, social processes and the individual (Davies & Harré 1990; Harré & van Langenhove 1991). The key argument is that self-descriptions, although they are experienced as ‘authentic self-productions’, actually reflect a ‘selection from the panoply of selves already available to be donned’ (Wetherell & Edley 1999, p. 343). This process is not at a conscious level and therefore remains mostly unrecognised. Subject positions are hierarchically organised, with some being dominant and others being marginalised. Positioning is seen as a ubiquitous process, intrinsically linked to discourse and forms a fundamental part in the social construction of the self. As Avdi (2011, pp. 67–68) writes, ‘as an analytic tool, subject positioning expands the focus from the personal level to interaction and social process’.

Even though identities are understood as being in continual states of change and tension, several authors argue that they have become increasingly fragmented and unstable ‘in late modernity as they are constructed across a number of contradictory and often antagonistic discourses’ (Hall 1996, p. 6; Hall & Gay 1996; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Where concepts like nation, class, gender and family had once provided a limited range of central categories to form identities, the late modern period has been characterised by the development of a wide and constantly evolving range of central categories, producing highly fragmented and contradictory identities (Alasuutari 2004; Hall 1992, 1996; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Jorgensen & Phillips (2002) argue that this increase in fragmentation and tension can be better understood ‘as part of “identity politics” where traditional and stable relations based, for example, on class, family or nation have been replaced by new, unstable identifications partly created through consumption.’ Davies & Harré (1990, p. 47; Harré & van Langenhove 1999) propose that the contradictions experienced between subject positions can create a significant opportunity for understanding and are necessary for individuals to exercise agency. Therefore, while identities are understood as being in constant tension, it is the degree to which this has occurred for social workers that is a central focus of this thesis.

The thesis also draws upon in part, and further develops a constructionist understanding of the concept of ‘role-conflict’, where differing ‘expectations result in incompatible role
pressures’ that can result in ‘conflict for an individual as the pressures and role forces compete and conflict’ (Korabik, Lero & Whitehead 2011, p. 128). Role conflict in this regard is understood as the high levels of tension created between competing and contradictory discursive positioning of the same role, for example, social worker. Role conflict has been associated with high levels of stress and burnout for social workers (Lloyd et al. 2002; McLean & Andrew 2000; Um & Harrison 1998) and the literature characterises the conflict as being mainly a tension between professional values and organisational demands (Lloyd et al. 2002). The high degree of tension and conflict between subject positions will continue to be explored throughout this thesis in relation to how it was experienced by research participants and the formation of their social work professional identity.

2.6 Rationale for theoretical approach

In the conceptualisation stages of this study, a preliminary analysis of the literature identified the relationship between news media and social work to be a poorly researched topic (Aldridge 1994, 1999; Galilee 2005; Franklin & Parton 1991, 2001). The limited amount of research utilised a broad positivist and quantitative approach and focused primarily on analysing media content or identifying social worker attitudes towards the news media. These studies were characterised by the use of large sample sizes that came at the expense of detail, leading to broad findings that classify the effects as either ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ (Lombard 2009; Zugazaga et al. 2006). Researchers who analysed the news media had tended to focus predominantly on child protection and not the profession as a whole (Franklin & Parton 1991, 2001; Galilee 2005). It was clear from the initial analysis that there was a significant lack of research from a paradigm that explored both subjective and discursive factors of the relationship.

In determining the most suitable approach, a social constructionist research paradigm (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Burr 2004; Holstein & Gubrium 2008; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002; Witkin 2011) was chosen as it would address a significant gap in the literature by researching both how the profession is discursively constructed in the news media and how this affects workers’ identity and action within the same timeframe. While other authors and approaches may have been appropriate to address the research gap (for example, Bourdieu, Giddens, Grounded Theory), constructionist research was identified as the most
suitable due to emphasis on the duality of macro discursive structures and subjective agency, the processes of reality construction and identity formation and the challenging of the taken-for-granted assumptions (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Burr 2004; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002).

As a researcher with a background in critical social work, and educated at a university that prioritises critical and constructionist thought, I have had ideological and philosophical leanings towards research approaches that appreciate the diversity, interconnectedness and complexity of the social world. Due in part to my education, my social work practice has been shaped predominantly by constructionist, critical and postmodernist thought (Fook 2002, 2012; Healy 2005; Pease & Fook 1999; Witkin 2011), therefore the research problem and initial literature review were explored using these perspectives. While I am not committed to any singular methodology, I approached this research by looking at how the relationship has been understood largely from a constructionist, and to some extent, critical perspective.

Further articulating my position as a researcher will be discussed in the final section of Part One.

2.7 Criticisms

Social construction has been argued by critics as being unusable, both politically and scientifically, as it is claimed to not be able to determine what is true or what is ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as all knowledge is relative and contingent (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Social construction theory has been critiqued for not focusing on the shared struggles of oppression and instead concentrating on the existence of multiple truths leading to a relativism of all statements as ‘equally good’ (Ife 1997; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002; Pease & Fook 1999). As Pease & Fook (1999) argue, only ‘strong’ or ‘extreme’ forms of postmodernism reject ‘the usefulness of commonalities that underlie diversity’ (Zufferey 2007, p. 18). Pease & Fook (1999, p. 12) argue that ‘weak’ forms of postmodernism, which inform this thesis, combined with critical theory, can contribute to the creation of emancipatory politics, including the critical aims previously identified. As argued by Zufferey (2007), given the collective aims and ethics of social work, such as a commitment to human
rights and social justice (contested as those ideas may be), extreme forms of postmodernism and total relativism are not useful to social work or to this research.

Several authors have challenged the main critiques levelled at constructionist research in its inability to produce valid, reliable and objective knowledge (Hacking 1999). Although the idea of ‘objective knowledge’ may be seen as incompatible with constructionist theory, Harding (1991) proposes that objectivity in constructionist research is achieved through strong reflexivity. Harding (1991) argues that as all knowledge is contingent, science presents a distorted understanding of the social world in its claim to produce findings that are free of context and therefore a naturalised reflection of the world. Harding reappropriates the term and introduces the concepts of ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ objectivity (Harding 1991; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002). Science is argued to represent ‘weak objectivity’ because it does not take into account its own social and historical context and therefore ‘strong objectivity’ is achieved primarily through ‘strong reflexivity’. This requires an examination and explicit acknowledgement of the cultural and historical positioning of the research and the researcher (Harding 1991).

As Jorgensen & Phillips (2002, p. 198) write:

Reflexivity has been proposed as an attempt to take into account the researcher’s own role in knowledge production in the light of the relativist premise, inherent in social constructionism, that one’s own knowledge is socially and culturally constructed. The aim is to redefine the classical relations of authority between the researcher and the people under study and to avoid positioning oneself as a sovereign authority with privileged access to truth.

In attempting to balance the idea that all knowledge is contingent and also producing accurate descriptions of the world, Haraway (1996) introduced the concept of situated knowledge. In line with constructionist theory, Haraway (1996) argues that all knowledge is partial and the product of specific theoretical frameworks. Deconstructing the contextual nature of research knowledge is made possible through ‘visualising technologies’, that in relation to social research are the theoretical frameworks that can show how the researcher’s representation of the social world comes from a specific location and that it is
also a construct. This study utilises reflexive processes informed by positioning theory (Harré & Davies 1990; Willig 1999) which will be detailed in later sections to provide a clear account of my cultural and historical positioning as a researcher and my role in the knowledge creation process.

Furthermore, this thesis supports the view that while the interpretation of reality that constructionist research presents is not better than any other at the level of ‘principle’, at a more ‘concrete’ level some interpretations can be advocated as being more rigorous, explicit and therefore ‘better’ than others (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 206). Research should take responsibility for providing a particular ‘description of reality on the basis of a particular epistemic interest; that is, critical research should explicitly position itself and distance itself from alternative representations of reality on the grounds that it strives to do something specific for specific reasons’ (Jorgensen & Phillips 2002, p. 205). Therefore, as stated previously, the aim is not to provide a grand theory regarding the relationship, but instead present an interpretation of this topic with a rigour, depth and transparency absent from most work on this topic to inform and foster discussion.

2.8 Constructionist theory and the research design

With its central focus on discourse, identity, process, context, deconstruction and reflexivity, this thesis builds on the epistemological assumptions presupposed by constructionist theory (and more specifically critical constructionism) to research the relationship between social work and the news media as social phenomena. In using constructionist theory as a research paradigm, it is understood that social work and news media are social constructs and occur mainly because of the relation between both subjective and discursive elements. Furthermore, this leads to a clear emphasis on meaning making, identity formation and the deconstructing of dominant assumptions and taken-for-granted discourses, in a reflexive manner (Fook 2002; Witkin 2011).

In understanding how social work and the news media exist, constructionist research moves beyond examining oppression and power exclusively, which pervades the majority of the previous research on the topic, and embraces the multifaceted relationship between both the subjectivities and the macro discourses that construct these phenomena. Furthermore,
constructionist theory provided the conceptual framework from which to develop the research design, with a specific focus on the contingent and situational nature of the knowledge produced and the reflexive positioning of the researcher.

Building on the constructionist underpinnings, the next section of this chapter will provide a theoretical framing of the main concepts of this thesis: social workers’ professional identity and the news media, with a particular focus on the former as it is the central concept of this thesis.

2.9 Main concepts: Social workers’ professional identity and the news media

The aim of this section is to provide greater theoretical clarity regarding the main concepts of this study, and delineating aspects that hold particular relevance to the main argument.

This section begins by presenting a constructionist theoretical understanding of ‘social workers’ professional identity’, its components (identified as domains) and their relationship, as was developed inductively from the research process and findings. Drawing on the concepts of discourses and subject positioning detailed previously, this section will explore the main areas and processes that constituted the professional identity for participants. This will begin by identifying the literature on the topic, including general debates. Then it will present a constructionist understanding of social workers’ professional identity, as further developed in this study, and exploring all the different domains that constitute it (including the relevant historical, socioeconomic and political, theoretical, organisational, professional, moral and educational realms) and their relationship. This chapter will then conclude with a constructionist analysis of ‘the news media’, which includes an exploration of constructionist theories of media influence.

A contextual analysis of Australian social work and the Australian news media will be explored in the research sites section of Chapter 4.
i. **Concept: Social workers’ professional identity**

The general literature on social workers’ professional identity indicates that despite the continued interest in defining and understanding what it constitutes, researchers know very little about how identities are formed amongst practitioners who carry out diverse, complex and often ambiguous social functions (Baxter 2011; Webb 2015). The professional identity has been defined in part as a practitioner’s professional concept of the self, constructed on characteristics, views, values and experiences (Ibarra 1999; Schein 1978). This has been theorised by some to be a continuously developing triangulation process of education, organisation and individual practice (TISSA 2011).

The idea of a social work professional identity is a complex and debated topic. An analysis of the constructionist literature suggests that there is a great deal of contestability about the significance of identity and professional development. As Payne writes, in the UK but of relevance to Australia, ‘the identity of the profession of social work has often seemed unclear and contested, and social workers in the UK have felt their identity to be bound up in specific roles provided for in legislation, rather than in broader conceptions of their potential role’ (2006, p. 138). Webb (2015) argues that despite this lack of clarity there are plenty of examples of an increased uptake and recognition of the importance of professional identity for social work in statements from associations, groups and researchers (AASW 2015; Levy, Shlomo & Itzhaky 2014; Wiles 2013). Of local relevance is the AASW, whose mission is ‘to promote the professional identity’, recently announcing that they have grown to over 9000 members, the largest number in their seventy-year history (AASW 2015).

This study understands the professional identity to be socially constructed. As a construct it is formed centrally through the use of language, subject positions and discursive practices (Berger & Luckmann 1966; Payne 2005). Therefore, its values, theories and approaches are contingent and contextually constructed, challenging modernist notions of there being an ‘ontologically stable and epistemologically coherent set of values in Western social work’ (Yan 2013, p. 17). Understanding social work and the professional identity as a social construct accepts that it is ambiguous, contested and responds to social and cultural contexts (Payne 2005). Moreover, what workers do as social workers in part creates social
work (Burke & Parker 2007; Sheppard 2006). There is no general consensus about what social work is and groups both within, and without, social work argue for and against different views (Gray & Webb 2012; Payne 2005). As Askeland & Payne (2001, p. 14) write, ‘social work has always been subject to competing claims of definition and practice, as social workers, politicians, service users and policy makers have struggled to lay claims on what social work is, and what it might be’. These definitional struggles have shaped the profession and are influenced by the ‘debates, disputes, and sometimes irreconcilable tensions within the field of social work and beyond’ (Gray & Webb 2012, p. 5).

**Social workers’ professional identity: Conceptual framing**

The existing literature on social workers’ professional identity failed to adequately account for the varying constructive practices that were occurring for participants when forming and maintaining their professional identity during the research. The writings are filled with broad statements regarding the different components and processes that are involved, leading to a frequently referenced but poorly understood concept (Baxter 2011; Webb 2015). It became apparent that there were identity formation processes observed throughout the research that were not sufficiently explained by the existing literature, especially in relation to all the different factors (identified as domains) that constitute it, and how they relate to each other. As an exploratory and inductive study, this was identified as an opportunity to further develop a constructionist understanding of the domains and processes that constitute social workers’ professional identity.

From the research, and as shown in Figure 3 p. 45 (which is also represented as Position A in Figure 2 p. 21), social workers’ professional identity is understood to be shaped primarily, but not exclusively, by eight domains through a reiterative and constructive process of identity formation and maintenance. The domains are in constant states of tension and alignment with each other, and are identified as being primarily at a discursive level with varying subject positions available.
The next section will detail what constitutes each of the eight domains ranging from the micro to the macro, which include: personal experience and values, social work education, social work values and ideals, social work theories and traditions, history of Australian social work, social work professional community, organisational & workplace context and neoliberal & managerialist policies, and it will conclude with an analysis of their relationship and degrees of tension and alignment, which are broadly but not accurately represented in Figure 3.

The domains

Domain: Personal experience and values

As a domain, personal values and experience are identified as the continually developing socialisation processes that occurred prior and concurrent to professional socialisation, ultimately establishing broad guidelines for guiding action determining what is morally acceptable and what is not. A constructionist paradigm understands this as a continuous and constructive process informed by numerous experiential and discursive factors. The divide between professional and personal values has been the focus of significant debates in
the literature (Doyle et al. 2009; González-Prendes 2011; Hindmarsh 1992; Reamer 2013) and is a key part of the *Code of Ethics*. As Cree (2011) argues, a social worker is not guided by personal values alone, but they cannot simply disregard them either. Personal values are a fundamental part of a professional identity as they ultimately are a significant motivator in the initial decision to become a social worker. A social worker’s own personal values and experience will also inevitably influence how they carry out their organisational role and the decisions and actions they take.

**Domain: Social work education**

In the development of a social work professional identity, formal education is identified as one of the earliest and most significant processes. Socialisation in social work education is argued by Miller (2013) as being an implicit, as opposed to an explicit, feature of the learning process and that ‘questions remain regarding not only what professional socialisation to social work actually looks like, but also how it occurs and what components are most critical’ (p. 368). As a tertiary qualification, professional social work education presents students with values and identities, as well as the core knowledge, as they are socialised into a homogenous professional culture (Hindmarsh 1993). It contributes in both intended and unintended ways to the socialisation of students to the professional culture (Barretti 2004; Miller 2010). It is seen as a dynamic and continually developing process that incorporates both the development of a professional identity and the internalisation of larger discourses and group norms. The extent to which this process is successful may be crucial to both professional ability and career satisfaction (Miller 2010). **Socialisation into social workers’ professional identity is understood to be a reiterative process that is not necessarily linear and determined by numerous factors.** Research suggests that personal factors, such as age (Barretti 2004) and gender (Barretti 2004; Wilson & Kelly 2010) can influence the professional socialisation process, although the effect is argued to be inconsistent across the literature and in need of further inquiry (Barretti 2004).

Regardless of the contested aspects, social work education is identified as a significant domain in the development of a professional identity and one of the earliest stages of professional socialisation. It is the first time in the socialisation process when an individual is positioned as a social worker. In the Australian context, social work education has been
argued to socialise students into an idealist understanding of the profession without acknowledging the complexities or contextual challenges of practice (Healy & Meagher 2004; McDonald 2006). It has been argued that there is a dominant discourse within social work education that socialises students into a powerful, middle class profession similar in status to the traditional professions, and that this caricature of social work limits workers’ capacity to deal with the changing nature of practice contributing to the sense of a highly fragmented identity experienced by practitioners (Healy & Meagher 2004). As a domain, it is a significant site in the formation and early socialisation into the ethics, values and ideals of the profession and forms the foundations of social workers’ professional identity.

Domain: Social work’s ethics, values and ideals

Social workers’ professional identity is formed in part by drawing upon a debated, broad and aspirational discourse of the profession’s ethics, values and ideals. These are best exemplified in the Australian context by the AASW Code of Ethics, which has come to symbolise the codification of the moral foundations of the profession (AASW 2010). Human rights and social justice serve as the moral motivation and justification of the profession that provides a clear narrative regarding the emancipatory and anti-oppressive. Social work as a professional project grew out of the humanitarian and egalitarian ideals of the enlightenment (Allan et al. 2009), and whose moral foundations have been critiqued extensively, as will be explored in the ‘traditions and theories’ domain. The aspirational discourses regarding the form and function of the profession are constructed around modernist understandings of progress and emancipation, underpinned by a structuralist binary discourse identifying the existence of oppressors and oppressed, with social workers being somewhere in between.

In providing a working definition of social work, the AASW Code of Ethics (2010) best captures the aspirational and idyllic moral base of the profession as Article 1.1 states ‘the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.’ Within this understanding, social work values and ideals are
reified and provide a discourse that positions the profession as part of a morally just project whose main aim is the ‘liberation’ of all human beings from oppression. Similar to many of the critiques of the various forms of Code of Ethics around the world, these aspirational ideals have been the source of much debate and critique with regard to their ethnocentricity, Western bias, and reductionist understandings of context, identity, relations and power (Hepworth et al. 2009). Regardless, the values of human rights and social justice are identified as the moral foundations from which practitioners practice and in part develop and maintain a professional identity.

**Domain: Social work traditions and theories**

As part of the education process, social workers are socialised into the profession’s broader traditions, knowledge bases and approaches to practice. Since its origins in the late 19th century, Australian social work has been constructed around the values, theories and traditions of Anglo-American social work (Allan et al. 2009; Morley et al. 2013). Social work as a profession has been argued to have emerged out of the ‘clash between liberal individualist and social transformationist’ approaches to practice, a tension which is present in practice to this very day (Morley et al. 2013, p. 87). Drawing predominately from the former, social work has its origins as an organised profession in the early part of the 20th century with the creation of female hospital welfare workers known as almoners (AASW Website 2013; Healy & Link 2012). This has been argued to represent in part the establishment of the ‘conventional’ approach to practice, which by drawing upon modernist, medical and psychological discourses, focuses on dealing primarily with problems at an individual level to address ‘perceived insufficiencies on a case by case basis’ (Morley et al. 2013, p. 105).

Counter to the ‘conventional’ approach is the critical social work tradition, which constructs the profession by drawing upon critical theory and is identified as being aligned to the settlement house movement (Allan et al. 2009). During the 1970s several groups within the profession challenged the ‘conventional’ approaches by critiquing them for ignoring structural factors and ultimately contributing to social workers becoming agents of social control, against what they perceived to be the core principles of the professional project. Critical social work in Australia draws upon critical, radical and postmodernist ideas to
construct the social function of the profession as one of identifying and challenging oppressive social structures, shifting the focus away from individual pathologising (Allan et al. 2009; Fook 2012). Furthermore, the critical approach to practice is constructed upon egalitarian values that challenge the professional status of the profession looking towards working collaboratively with clients to both challenge oppressive structures and address individual needs (Allan et al. 2009; Fook 2012). While ‘conventional’ approaches continue to be the most prevalent ways of constructing the profession, Allan et al. (2009) argue that they have incorporated certain elements of critical thought by focusing on the social context and structural source of inequality.

In drawing upon constructionist theory, it is understood that this is a somewhat dichotomous division and construction of social work practice tradition, whose dominance can be understood in relation to the function that this overly simplistic binary has potentially served. While it may be helpful in identifying broad traditions, and even though workers may identify as exclusively one or the other, a constructionist understanding would suggest that it is not a clearly demarcated division in practice and in the field.

In the development and maintenance of a social work identity, this domain presents the larger traditions and theoretical ways of conceptualising the profession, including its approaches to practice and critiques. As a domain, it is a highly diverse and fragmented discourse presented to social workers usually in the earlier stages of their education and professional socialisation. As a knowledge base it presents a debated field that reinforces the continually evolving and contextually determined aspects of the profession, but also how elusive a core definition can be.

**Domain: History of Australian social work**

The professional identity is influenced by the history of Australian social work, and in particular, the discursive construction of the profession’s ‘dark history’. As a domain the historical practices of social work compound many of the challenges experienced by practitioners, especially in relation to establishing a moral base from which to practice. Social work in Australia is constructed, due to its colonial history, as belonging to the Western social work tradition, which includes the adoption of its range of professional
values and practice-theory approaches. Since its beginnings in the late 19th century, Australian social work has been constructed around the values and traditions of Anglo-American social work, including the poor law morality of charity work and the social justice focus of the settlement house movement (Allan et al. 2009; Reisch 2008; Yan 2013). The poor law morality, including the deserving and undeserving poor dichotomy, serve as the historical foundations of the profession, and although they are positioned as being highly problematic in the values and education domains, they are also reminiscent of many of the current organisational practices workers engage in, especially in state welfare contexts (Cree 2013).

Although social work in Australia has a diverse history, historically three key chapters play a significant function in the development and maintenance of a professional identity: the Stolen Generation (Briskman 2014), institutional child sexual abuse (Garrett 2013) and forced adoption practices of the 1960s and 1970s (Fronek & Cuthbert 2013). These examples provide cautionary tales for practitioners regarding the oppressive function that a professional project so closely aligned to the state and government policies may adopt, including highlighting the potential for any form of contemporary practices that, while currently morally justifiable, may be seen as oppressive in hindsight. This emphasises how contextually bound the profession is and directly challenging ideals of a morally stable and independent professional project. As a domain it is a fragile balance of the successes or contributions of the profession and the more oppressive elements of past practices.

**Domain: The broader social work professional community**

A professional identity for social workers is constructed around professional labels and predicated by a sense of belonging to a larger and homogenous professional project. In relation to social work, this is identified as a large, but disputed and sometimes unidentifiable group of individuals with similar education backgrounds and core values and ideals, but whose great diversity in practice experience and organisational context continually undermine this sense of a shared community. As Payne (2005) suggests, social workers struggle to identify a larger macro definition of the profession given the diversity of views and approaches and therefore tend to focus on their organisational context. The professional community, as a construct, is fragmented and contentious as different groups
within argue for dominance in defining what constitutes social work (Payne 2005). In Australia, organisations like the AASW attempt to foster a sense of professional community by highlighting the commonalities regardless of field. Attempts to provide a broad definition continue to be highly contentious as best exemplified with the debates regarding the need for professional registration (Healy & Link 2012).

In this respect the broader sense of inclusiveness that comes with belonging to a professional community is usually predicated with the disparity in approaches and knowledge bases that constitute this group. From radical to clinical, the subgroups and professionals that constitute the social work professional community are highly varied to the extent that groups characterise opposing approaches to practice as invalid forms of social work (Fook 2012). The professional community as a construct, while necessary in the development of a professional identity (Ashford & Mael 1989), is also a largely unknown, fragmented and contested group.

**Domain: Workplace, organisational context and role**

The workplace domain is identified as the discursive and material context within which practitioners are predominantly positioned as professionals and carry out their role and function as social workers (Payne 2005). This domain also includes clients, other professionals, and larger public attitudes that shape how they practice. The organisational context is identified as another significant stage in the professional socialisation (Hindmarsh 1993). It is through the workplace and the carrying out of the social work role that professional identities are partly developed and entrenched in relation to discourses of recognition and its reality maintenance function. As Webb (2015, p. 7) argues, workplaces have great influence on practitioners in part ‘through identity and identification but also through the regulation of professional conduct’. Barbour & Lammers (2015, p. 38) suggest that the institutionalisation of a professional identity can be understood as ‘the emergence, establishment, and sedimentation of what it means to hold a particular position or engage in a particular activity in the context of the larger, generic notion of profession’. The organisational context also plays a significant function in the identity formation process through identity regulation and control. Alvesson & Willmott (2002, p. 620) argue that organisational control is achieved through the self-positioning of workers within
managerially driven discourses about their role and function, to which they may become ‘more or less identified and committed’.

Social work as a professional activity is identified as being a result of a range of larger political and social processes, occurring similarly in Western industrialised countries. Central to these processes was the development of the welfare regime that has historically provided the main organisational vehicle for social work. The welfare regime is the primary supporting institution that sustains the social work professional project and in many respects its embodiment (McDonald 2006). Therefore, as a domain, the organisational context of social work is identified as a significant factor in the formation and development of a professional identity. As a constructive force, the organisational content is intrinsically linked to the broader socioeconomic and political context that will be explored in the next domain, and their relation at the conclusion.

**Domain: Neoliberal and managerialist policies**

As a social construct social workers’ professional identity is shaped by the macro discourses of the broader Australian social context (Garrett 2013; Morley et al. 2013; Wallace & Pease 2011). These include, amongst several others: global capitalism, neoliberalism, managerialism, globalisation, patriarchy, biomedical discourses, government and the law (Allan et al. 2009; Garrett 2013; Morley et al. 2013, p. 31). In relation to the development of a professional identity, the rise and prevalence of neoliberal and managerialist discourses and policies are the most significant.

Neoliberalism is a highly debated and contested concept that broadly represents a set of dominant economic, political and social ideas. As Penna & O’Brien (2008) argue, the social work literature is filled with examples arguing for its detrimental impacts, but it is quite unclear as to what exactly neoliberalism is besides sometimes being an umbrella term for everything wrong with society. It is not possible to provide an exhaustive definition of the concept, but of relevance to the formation and maintenance of a professional identity, neoliberalism is understood as an ideology that has shaped the Australian policy framework with a core emphasis on global capitalism and the market as the organising principle of the social world (Allan et al. 2009; Garrett 2013; Morley et al. 2013). Of particular significance is
the tension between neoliberalism and the existence of a welfare state. In Australia the
dominance of this ideology at a political level has led to significant welfare reform and
changes to the way in which social services are produced and managed (McDonald 2006;
Wallace & Pease 2011). Within a neoliberal view it could be argued that the state’s
responsibility for welfare should be confined to maintaining a residual welfare system of last
resort, favouring private forms of welfare. Given social work’s organisational relationship to
the welfare state as argued previously, the dominance of a policy framework that seeks to
minimise state intervention has directly transformed the contexts and therefore the role
and function of state-sponsored social work.

Directly related to neoliberalism, managerialism is identified as the principles, practices and
techniques that implement its ideals in an organisational setting (Morley et al. 2013). The
focus of managerialism is not on larger economic systems but rather the restructuring of
organisational management, including the roles and functions of professionals. Its
dominance has resulted in significant changes to the social work profession in directly
shaping what constitutes professional practice, including as some have argued, its
deprofessionalisation (Healy & Meagher 2004). As Beddoe (2013) argues, the dominance of
managerialist discourses has diminished the status and decision-making abilities of most
professions, including significant policy changes in recent years that have reframed welfare
work as a non-professional activity. Policy has shifted towards the privatisation of social
services and evidence from the USA and Australia suggests that professionals are not being
considered for management positions in their field but that these roles are now going to the
more business oriented professions, such as accountancy, law and business management
(Healy 2002; Martin & Healy 1993; Patti 2000). With the increased focus on new models of
public management, including the use of technologies of control such as evidence-based
practice, there has been a push to impose greater control and economic accountability over
all the professions, including medicine, which has long been identified as the most
prestigious and independent (Coburn 2006; Willis 2006).

This discursive shift has challenged the status of professions and has occurred during the
time when social work professional groups were seeking improved status and recognition
(Beddoe 2013). The challenge to professions is identified by several authors as stemming
from the critique of the acceptance of their expert status (Donzelot 1980; Duyvendak, Knijn
& Kremer 2006; Foucault 1979). Kuhlmann (2006) and Kremer & Tonkens (2006) suggest that this critique and discursive change has transformed the roles of the worker and client and placed it within a consumerist discourse reconceptualising individuals as consumers, and as such constructed with increased rights and power for self-determination. While this has been championed by social workers who have long challenged their own expert status, it has also undermined the professional status of social work and in particular the establishment of an exclusive claim to knowledge (Harington & Beddoe 2014).

It is the dominance of these two discourses and their effects on policy that are identified by this thesis as being two of the most significant contextual factors that contribute to the contemporary development of a social work professional identity.

**The relationships between domains**

Having established the eight core domains in the development of a professional identity, this section identifies how this thesis understands their relationship to one another. A constructionist paradigm suggests that a professional identity is not a stable entity but rather an ongoing process of relational interpretation and customisation shaped by discursive, contextual and subjective factors (Payne 2005). In the formation and maintenance of a social work professional identity, the eight domains are in varying states of tension and alignment, with changing degrees of influence depending on context.

In line with the constructionist underpinnings, this thesis identifies the broader socioeconomic policies as a dominant and powerful discursive and material domain that is the context that shapes, and to a lesser degree is also shaped by, all other aspects of the professional identity. The conflicts and tensions between all the domains at its core are understood as a contradiction in discursive conceptions regarding the form, values and function of professional social work. This, for example, may be in relation to personal versus professional values, modernist versus postmodernist traditions, conventional versus critical practice, education versus workplace. Of significance and central relevance to this study is the tension between social work values and ideals and the organisational and larger socio-political contexts that practitioners inhabit.
As Hindmarsh (1993, p. 112) argues, when social workers:

...hold a set of universal principles such as social justice, equity, conservation and respect for persons within a situation or world which they experience to be manifestly unjust, inequitable, oppressive ... then, inevitably, they will experience political conflicts and moral dilemmas. Such conflicts and dilemmas, whether exacerbated by their university course or not, will range their personal integrity against the actions they find they and/or their colleagues must take. Their sense of autonomy is thus also challenged.

These conflicts have been argued extensively in the literature, and also identified in participants’ accounts, to represent a tension between what social workers were trained to be, and what they do (Carpenter 1997).

The relationship between all the different domains will be explored in greater depth throughout this document in relation to participants’ formation and maintenance of a professional identity throughout the research process. The tension between domains, and the role of the news media, will be a central focus of Part Three.

**Social workers’ professional identity: Summary**

From the research, it is evident that participants’ experience of their professional identity is highly precarious, contradictory and contested with numerous elements shaping it, and in constant conflict with each other, including: the profession’s values and ideals, their job and organisational context, personal values and experience, their social work education, the broader socioeconomic and historical context, the professional community and the varying theoretical understandings and critiques of the profession. This fragmented view of identity can be somewhat at odds with the significance of attachment that has been argued to be a key component of developing a professional identity, from predominantly a positivist understanding of the process (Hindmarsh 1993; Rothausen et al. 2015). The degree of tension and conflict, largely between what individuals think social work should be within the profession’s values and ideals, and what they do due to organisational and larger policy context, can result in a fragile and conflicted subject positioning as the constant critiques
and uncertainty can undermine any course of action to guide practice. This instability, as will be explored throughout this thesis, was momentarily and problematically resolved when the focus centred on social work’s relationship to the news media.

The next section explores how this study understands the news media.

ii. Concept: News media and social construction

In drawing upon the constructionist underpinnings, the news media is understood as a site for macro discourses and a multifaceted and significant social institution in the democratic and socialisation process that constructs and reflects public action and consciousness (Bell & Garrett 1998; Franklin & Parton 1991; Hall 1997; McCullagh 2002; McCombs 2004; Ott & Mack 2009). The news media is a product of a complex and constantly evolving range of social, organisational and cultural processes (Anderson 2013). Ott & Mack (2009) argue that the news media has gone from being one institution among many within our culture, to being the very basis of our cultural environment and a significant site for dominant discourses. As with social work, it does not exist in a void and is shaped by larger social, economic and cultural factors, including the dominance of neoliberal and managerial discourses and its impacts on media diversity and plurality. Since the 17th century, and thanks to the spread of the printing press, news media has been recognised as a public forum for discussion, information and debate. Several authors argue that, in principle, the news media is constructed around modernist notions of it being a democratic watchdog, a guardian of public interest and acting as a check for public accountability and transparency (Downing et al. 2004). As with social work, authors argue that the social justice and egalitarian principles that form the basis of news media are not reflected in modern practices (Margolin 1997; Ott & Mack 2009).

News media presents a specific construction of social reality, shaped by a variety of cultural and socioeconomic factors, which is promoted as a singular and objective truth (Anderson 2013). The media in general has been argued to become society’s main storyteller affecting every aspect of the social world in both ‘shaping what we learn, and how we learn’ (Ott & Mack 2011, p. 17).
As Talbot (2007, p. 3) argues:

The importance of the media in the modern world is incontrovertible. For some sections of society ... the media have largely replaced older institutions ... as the source of understanding of the world. Since discourse plays a vital role in constituting people’s realities, the implications for the power and influence of media discourse are clear. Moreover, in modern democracies the media serve a vital function as a public forum.

Social construction theory understands the role of media in contrast to other theoretical traditions of media influence, including ‘mass society theory’, where populations are seen to be easily manipulated and under the control of the media and its owners’ interests, or ‘limited effects theory’, where it is argued that the media is unable to shift people’s strongly held beliefs and ideas (Baran & Davis 2011; McQuail 2010). As Baran & Davis (2011, p. 324) argue, ‘when social constructionism is applied to mass communication, it makes assumptions similar to those of symbolic interactions, it assumed audiences are active ... they are active even when this activity largely serves to reinforce what they already know, to make them more willing to trust and act on views of the social world communicated to them by media’. Within this understanding, audience members do not passively receive information but rather actively engage with the medium and ‘store only what serves culturally defined needs’ (Baran & Davis 2011, p. 324). Social construction theory understands the media as a significant site for cultural meaning and as a source of discourses that provide the acceptable range of roles and behaviours (Mcquail 2010; Baran & Davis 2011).

Spitulnik (2000) writes that the news media provides inhabitable discourses that form the substance of culture and experience. News media reflects and influences the formation and expression of culture, politics and social life (Bell & Garrett 1998). The role of the media in society is a highly contested and debated concept. The history of communication theory is marked by theoretical swings of a pendulum. Fiske (2010, p. 2) notes this as a swing between ‘producer-centred’ understandings of communication, where messages are encoded for audience decoding and thought to affect audiences in ways intended by the message sender (magic bullet or process theories of communication), and ‘audience-
centred’ understandings of communication, where the meanings of communicated texts are said to depend on how they are read or negotiated by particular audiences within specific contexts. Communication theorists (Baran & Davis 2011; Fiske 2010; Lewis 2005) over the past 100 years have tended to swing between the views that the media is all-powerful to the view that power rests with the audience, a swing that occurs about every ten years.

McCullagh (2002) also notes that the latest swing has placed the audience back in a position of power in its relationship with the media (mainly through the influence of social media). Recent developments in the field have sought to synthesise the pendulum’s opposites into a more sophisticated understanding of the influence of media, adopting general constructionist understandings. Lewis (2005) argues that meaning making is not merely an exercise of media producers, but is absolutely implicated in the dynamics of context, production and consumption. ‘This complex of associations can only be understood if we broaden our definition of the media in terms of a set of relationships and processes. The ‘media’ becomes a collective noun defining the dynamic of the construction, contestation and deconstruction of meanings’ (Lewis 2005, p. 6). Audiences in this sense ‘are as critical to the media as producers, distributors and regulators’ (Lewis 2005, p. 6).

In understanding the role of media in society this thesis also draws upon agenda setting theory (McCombs 2004), which seeks to explain how mass media (defined as a means of communication that collapse and transcend physical space) influences public opinion and the creation of dominant discourses. Readers not only learn about a given issue, but also about how much importance to attach to that issue from the amount of information in a news story and its position (McCombs 2004). Agenda setting is about the transfer of salience (McCombs 2004). Over time, elements emphasised in the media come to be regarded as important on the public agenda. As Bernard Cohen (1963) famously stated, the press ‘may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling the world what to think about’. Agenda setting theory also proposes that when experiencing media content, the audience will be more susceptible to influence on issues with which they do not have direct personal experience, and therefore become reliant on the medium to determine the degree of importance (Priest 2010).
In summary, building on the core theory, this thesis understands the news media as a site for macro discourses and a key location for meaning that provides the acceptable range of roles and behaviours. It is this theoretical framing of the news media that has shaped how this thesis understands and researched its relationship to social work.

A contextual understanding of the Australian news media, including media ownership, will be explored in the research sites section of Chapter 4.

2.10 Conclusion

Chapter 2 positioned the thesis within a social constructionist theoretical body of knowledge. It outlined how a constructionist paradigm provided the theoretical basis from which this thesis understands the social world, the research process and its main concepts. It has provided the foundations from which the research design was developed, with a specific focus on identity, subjectivity, language, discourses, deconstructing the taken for granted and the contextual nature of the research process. Therefore, in researching the relationship, this study understands social workers as social agents who are positioned within and shape/are shaped by macro discourses; and the news media as a site for macro objectivated discourses. This chapter concluded with a conceptual framing of the main concepts of this thesis: the news media and the social work professional identity, with a further development and particular focus on the latter as it is the central concept of the thesis.

The aim of this chapter was to provide greater theoretical clarity regarding how the study understands its focus of inquiry. The next chapter will build upon the theoretical foundations to explore the broader scholarship on the topic in order to identify the lacunae in knowledge that this research addresses.
Chapter 3: Literature review – Social work and the news media

3.1 Introduction

The main theme that arises from the review of the literature, predominantly from the profession’s own press (or trade press), is the dominant idea that social work has been unfairly singled out by the news media by focusing overwhelmingly on child protection failures and that this negatively impacts workers (DeLauro 2005; Galilee 2005; Gibelman 2004; Franklin & Parton 1991, 2001; Mendes 2001a; Zugazaga et al. 2006). The majority of the writings come from the UK trade press and utilise research findings that rely on limited and methodologically unclear media analyses and online surveys in order to study the degree of hostility shown to the profession in the reporting and the negative impacts on practice (Galilee 2005; Lombard 2009). Critics of this view argue that the idea that the profession is under attack is entrenched within the professional community, seemingly unquestioned, as research has found that beyond key incidents, where the media potentially highlighted serious incidents of unethical practice, coverage has tended to be quite varied and even positive (Aldridge 1990, 1994; Mawby et al. 1979).

Internationally, the lack of research that rigorously analyses how social workers experience news media portrayals of the profession parallels the scarcity of research into the topic in Australia. While it is argued that news media portrayals of the profession are unfairly critical and have been detrimental to workers in Australia (AASW 2012; Mendes 2001a, 2008a, 2008b; McIntyre 1981; Petre 1990), there is a dearth of research that explores how such a key social institution shapes workers and practice. This is identified to be a dominant and taken-for-granted assumption in the Australian context.

In order to highlight how this study addresses a substantial lack of knowledge, Chapter 3 explores the literature in relation to the focus of inquiry. This will be done by initially identifying the larger research tradition to which this study belongs. Then the review will examine the literature on the topic chronologically in three major cultural contexts: the UK, North America and Australia/New Zealand. Once the broader arguments have been
established, this chapter will conclude by arguing for the existence of lacunae in knowledge that this thesis addresses.

An exhaustive and continued review of the literature was conducted throughout the four years of the candidature, influenced primarily by the strategies and methods proposed by Kiteley & Stogdon (2013) and Thyer (2010). In the first twelve months, the review began with an exploratory analysis using the RMIT library database for books, journal articles, theses and other relevant texts. Once the initial review was completed, the analyses became more focused and also included social work trade press publications in either print or electronic format, including websites, blogs and social media. This process was conducted approximately every six months until the completion of the candidature. The literature review identified an extensive amount of writings on the topic and this was summarised and analysed using EndNote and Excel software. Thematic analysis (Coughlan, Cronin & Ryan 2013) was conducted to identify major themes and gaps in the literature.

It is important to note that the review of the literature was unable to identify any significant amount of writing on the topic from any other cultural contexts, except for a single research paper on the public and the news media’s perception of social work in Croatia (Knežević & Butler 2003). This may have been due to database language limitations so it is not possible to infer the degree of significance this topic holds in non-English contexts.

3.2 Research tradition

This research contributes to the larger body of knowledge that studies the impact that the media’s constructions of the ‘caring professions’ have for their respective practices. Although the literature would suggest otherwise (Franklin & Parton 1991), social work is not the only professional group that believes the news media has unfairly portrayed their practices. The struggle for public and professional recognition has been exemplified through the challenges faced by many professional groups in arguing that the news media, as a source of both information and entertainment, needs to depict their work in an accurate and non-sensationalised manner. The existing research is vast and has primarily looked at the effects of the media’s coverage of nurses (Hall et al. 2003; Summers & Summers 2009), doctors (Lacalle 2008), psychologists (Schultz 2005; Sleek 1998; Wedding & Niemiec 2010)
and teachers (Anderson 2007; Blackmore & Thompson 2004). The common theme is that as a medium that prioritises entertainment and brevity, it is not well suited to portray the complexities of practice for professions that address the bio-psychosocial needs of individuals.

The research that explores the media constructions of the different professions has sought to better understand how public recognition occurs, granting the worker the status of expert. While each profession has researched the issue using several methodologies, methods and conceptual understandings regarding the role of media, the commonality is that media constructions play an important role in forming public opinions. While the role of media in society is highly contested, the literature is almost unanimous in emphasising its significance.

The majority of the findings highlight the oversimplified and highly stereotypical nature of entertainment and news media’s constructions of the ‘caring professions’. These representations are argued to undermine the profession and create an unrealistic expectation for service users (Hall et al. 2003; Lacalle 2008; Summers & Summers 2009; Schultz 2005). The findings are contrasted upon deeper analysis of the impacts for each respective profession. While some of the research exploring social work media coverage has found a high degree of negativity (Galilee 2005), other professions have identified greater complexity in terms of portrayals, beyond the positive/negative dichotomy. For example, doctors and psychiatrists (Lacalle 2008; Schultz 2005) seem to be more affected by how the media constructs their patients or field of practice, for example, mental health, over their specific practices.

There are strong similarities between social work media coverage and that of nurses and teachers. Research studying representations of nurses has found greater variety, ranging from experts in their field to simply doctors’ assistants, but the concerns, as opposed to social work, are less about negative portrayals than misrepresentations (Summers & Summers 2009; Hall et al. 2003). Summers & Summers (2009) argue that news and entertainment media have downplayed the important role that nurses play in saving lives, leading to a shortage of workers, as the role is predominantly represented to be a series of menial tasks. In contrast, the research that looked at nurses in the news media during specific cases, for example, the SARS crisis in the early 2000s, generally found the profession
was given a higher degree of recognition and virtue (Hall et al. 2003). Focusing on the portrayal of teachers in the UK news media, Hansen (2009) discovered a substantial shift between 1991 and 2005. The research found a change from a negative view of teachers as ‘troublesome to a more positive emphasis on teachers as a hardworking profession besieged by mounting pressures’ (Hansen 2009, p. 335).

The research tradition to which this study belongs shares an understanding about the importance of news and entertainment media for practice. While the writings and research findings vary for each of the professions, there is a commonality regarding the importance of how service users understand professional practice and the dominant idea regarding the media’s inability to capture the complexity of services. The findings emphasise that while media coverage is an issue for all the professions listed, the social work literature suggests that none of them has experienced the continued backlash and rare cases of positive coverage that social work has (Franklin & Parton 1991; Galilee 2005).

As a broad research tradition, the scholarship is dominated by empirical studies that seek to understand the impacts and report them, but fail to explore the complexities. This research contributes to this tradition by analysing the topic with a theoretical rigour absent from most work. Furthermore, the research design utilised by this thesis, and presented in the next chapter, can provide a framework for analysis that can be applied to any profession seeking to understand how the media affects workers, beyond oversimplified and dichotomous generalisations.

The following sections of this review will explore the existing literature on social work and the news media chronologically in three major and relevant cultural contexts: UK, North America and Australia/New Zealand.

### 3.3 Research in the United Kingdom

In the UK, the Maria Colwell child abuse case of 1973 marks a clear before and after in the British literature and research into the topic. Prior to this, while there are references to the importance of positive news and entertainment media coverage towards social work, the literature suggests that it was not identified as an issue of main concern (Aldridge 1994;
Butler & Drakeford 2011; Franklin & Parton 1991; Galilee 2005; Goddard & Saunders 2001; Warner 2015). The only significant work identified prior to 1973 was completed by Timms (1962), and although he researched the entertainment media, and not the news media, it is still of significance as it established a research tradition that focused on the effects of the medium on practice.

Building on the works of Kadushin (1958) and Pollak (1961) analysing the public image of social work in the USA, Timms (1962) completed the first research project on the general issue of media impacts internationally. Timms (1962) was preoccupied with the apparent invisibility of the profession (Franklin & Parton 1991) and conducted quantitative surveys of the general public and an analysis of the entertainment media at the time to explore public awareness of the profession; a small but unspecified sample size was used. To Timms’ (1962) dismay, while probation officers had received substantial coverage in a television drama series, just 7% of the sample had heard of a ‘social caseworker’ and a third did not know what social workers did. The findings prompted Timms (1962, p. 7) to observe that ‘social workers might usefully consider the ways in which the medium of television can be used to portray an accurate and helpful image of social work’. The majority of the respondents associated social work with charities, and accorded the work a lower status than doctors, teachers, police and nurses (Timms 1962). Furthermore, the main stereotype was of a ‘middle aged spinster, presumably of the feeding hot soup to the homeless variety’ (Franklin & Parton 1991, p. 91), also reinforcing the representation of social work as a ‘women’s profession’. Despite Timms’ (1962) work, it was not until the murder of seven-year-old Maria Colwell by her stepfather in 1973 that media coverage on welfare services, and in particular news media, was identified as a significant issue for UK social workers (Aldridge 1994; Franklin & Parton 1991; Galilee 2005).

Maria Colwell was born on 25 March 1965 and lived in foster care from a young age. Upon being returned to her biological mother and stepfather, her school and neighbours contacted local authorities, including social workers, regarding suspected abuse. Despite the concerns, Maria was allowed to stay with her mother and stepfather, and on the 6 January 1973 she died from internal injuries, including major head trauma (Butler & Drakeford 2011; Mudaly & Goddard 2006). The stepfather was found guilty of her murder. As Parton (1985) argues, it was through the Colwell case that child abuse went from being largely ignored by
the general public and media, and seen by professionals as ‘marginal to their everyday practices’, to being cemented as a ‘major social problem’ (Parton 1985, p. 69). The news media coverage at the time focused mainly on the inability of social workers to prevent such a tragedy (Franklin & Parton 1991).

From 1973 to 1975 the UK social work trade press, such as Community Care and the BASW’s (British Association of Social Workers) Social Work Today, began writing in editorials about the corresponding backlash to the profession from the British news media and the public following the Colwell case and subsequent public inquiry (Franklin & Parton 1991; Mawby et al. 1979; Parton 1985). The editorials around this time emphasised the crisis of faith (Silavwe 1975) that was affecting social work and the detrimental impacts that this was having for workers. The proceeding years led to further public scrutiny into the effectiveness of social work as child abuse deaths continued to receive substantial media coverage. The majority of the social work press at the time highlighted the incessant and vicious attacks on the profession by the British news media (see Social Work Today, vol. 5, no. 14, vol. 6, 1976). The critique of social work during the early 1970s was not limited to the news media, as sectors within the profession had also become highly critical of the profession’s role in society (Allan et al. 2009). As identified in the previous chapter, this period was also marked by the rise of radical approaches to social work that, drawing upon Marxist critiques of capitalism, were highly critical of the ‘conventional approaches’ to practice, including child protection, which seemed to blame the victim, ignore structural factors and serve as agents of social control. As Morley et al. (2013) argue, the radical approaches and subsequent internal critiques of social work occurred simultaneously in Australia (Throssell 1975), Britain (Bailey & Brake 1975) and the US (Galper 1975).

While most of the writings during this period about the news media were from the trade press and do not acknowledge the radical critiques, instead focusing on the unfair victimisation of the profession, the late 1970s saw the publication of two seminal and highly influential research projects responding to the professional and political climate of the time: Mawby et al.’s (1979) analysis of post-Colwell news media coverage of social work, and Stevenson & Parsloe’s (1978) study of the experience of social service social workers. Mawby et al. (1979), building on the work of Timms (1962), completed the first piece of formal media analysis into the backlash. Looking at eight national UK newspapers over a
two-month period in 1978, Mawby et al. (1979) conducted content analysis in order to test the hypotheses that social work will get bad press. Although the study was small, it found that while coverage was critical it was not excessively so, and that beyond child protection cases, daily coverage seemed more diverse, and even more positive, than assumed. The research paper concluded by arguing that social workers need to learn to work with the news media and become more pre-emptive in creating a positive public profile (Mawby et al. 1979).

The other significant piece of work was Stevenson & Parsloe’s (1978) study of the ‘feelings, attitudes and priorities’ of social services social workers. While the research itself did not set out to specifically examine media impacts, given the professional struggles of the time, it became a central point in their findings, as it seemed to shape both practice and the professional climate (Franklin & Parton 1991). The authors, using a qualitative approach, interviewed 360 social workers and discovered that the intense media interest had created substantial anxieties in workers’ attitudes towards practice, noting that a ‘pervasive theme running through our respondents’ comments was simply fear’ (Stevenson & Parsloe 1978, p. 322). Stevenson & Parsloe’s (1978) work was important because it was the first to interview workers, yet it did not use a clear methodological approach and did not lead to a trend as the next project to engage with workers directly did not occur until the late 1980s (NALGO 1989). With child abuse well established in the public consciousness as a social crisis, Mawby et al.’s (1979) and Stevenson & Parsloe’s (1978) work ushered in a new wave of UK research into the topic in the 1980s.

The 1980s saw the publication of two seminal texts: Golding & Middleton (1982) *Images of Welfare: Press and public attitudes to poverty* and Wroe’s (1988) *Social Work, Child Abuse and the Press* (Wroe 1988). Golding & Middleton (1982) completed one of the most extensive and theoretically thorough examinations of the relationship between social welfare and the news media, although the focus was primarily on the development of mass media theory (Aldridge 1990). Adopting a pluralist view of media influence, their work studied the role of mass media in shaping public opinion and consciousness with regard to welfare and its recipients. The book briefly explores the impact for social work, emphasising that outside of key incidents that highlight serious ethical, professional and organisational
failings, the portrayal of the profession in the press is generally diverse and varied in both fields and outcomes, and less critical than assumed.

Wroe (1988) on the other hand specifically examined the complex relationship between news media and social work practice, although no workers were interviewed. As Wroe (1988) highlights, UK media coverage of the Colwell case in the early 1970s had direct consequences for legislation, policy and resource allocation in social services. Wroe (1988) argues that the 1975 UK *Children’s Act* reflected public reaction to the Colwell case, in the same way that the 1989 *Children’s Act* also responded to similar concerns raised by the Cleveland case. Wroe (1988) writes that due to the complexity of practice, most social work is of little interest to the news media and the general public. Social work stories only receive coverage when major failures occur. Wroe’s (1988) research discusses how certain social work stories, and fields of practice, are viewed as newsworthy. The criterion for what is understood as newsworthy was developed by media sociologists in the 1970s to explain why crime stories received so much prominence in the media (Aldridge 1994; Wheeler, Turner, & Orange 2013). The eight news values that a news story should achieve are: immediacy, dramatisation, personalisation, simplification, titillation, conventionalism, structured access and novelty (Wheeler, Turner, & Orange 2013). Wroe (1988) argues that due to the complexity of social work the majority of practice contexts do not meet the newsworthy criteria. Wroe (1988) suggests there is an incompatibility between the characteristics of newsworthiness and the complexity of social work practice.

The UK literature in the 1980s and 1990s was marked by an increase in interest on the issue, parallel to the perceived increased media scrutiny on the practices of the profession. The mid to late 1980s saw two further high profile social work cases that brought into question the effectiveness of social work: the Beckford and Cleveland cases. This led to an increase in research, journals, magazine articles and books attempting to make sense of the past and better prepare social workers for the challenges (Franklin & Parton 1991). Research on the topic continued to be smaller-sized content analysis of news media (Franklin & Parton 1991, 2001; Wroe 1988) and the majority of the writings came from trade publications like *Social Work Today* and *Community Care* advocating for the profession, a trend that continues to this day.
The ‘Cleveland affair’ of the late 1980s cemented the idea of a media backlash towards social work and led to increase interest on the impacts of media coverage from researchers (Franklin & Parton 1991). In Cleveland, England in 1987, 121 cases of suspected child sexual abuse were diagnosed by two paediatricians at a local hospital. This led to several child protection orders that resulted in a large majority of the children being removed by social workers from their parents’ care. After several court trials, twenty-six cases were found by judges to have been incorrectly diagnosed, and ninety-six of the one hundred and twenty-one cases were dismissed in court (Davidson 2008; Galilee 2005). In exploring the fallout, Franklin & Parton (1991, 2001), Winter (1992) and Aldridge (1990, 1994) conducted substantial media analyses of social work in the UK media in the late 1980s and 1990s. Franklin & Parton (1991) identified four child protection cases, ranging from sexual abuse to non-accidental injuries resulting in death, in which media coverage focused primarily on social work services and their role in these tragedies. Franklin & Parton’s (1991, 2001) research sought to specifically identify dominant discourses about the profession in the media and discovered two prevalent yet contradictory themes. The research found that social workers were identified as either ‘fools or wimps’ or ‘villains and bullies’.

When social workers were identified as ‘fools or wimps’, it was mainly around cases where children died from non-accidental injuries in the care of their parents and workers were criticised for not acting sooner (Franklin & Parton 1991). The authors found that this coverage was based around a stereotypical view of workers, framing them as ineffectual, under-skilled individuals who lacked the capacity for professional judgement (Franklin & Parton 1991). When identified as ‘villains and bullies’, it was focusing on parent experiences of having their children removed. In these instances, workers were depicted as authoritarian, with little regard for individual freedoms and as enforcers of a dictatorial welfare state. This dichotomous image of the profession parallels the debates in the social work literature regarding the profession’s care and control functions (Fook 2002, Parton & O’Byrne 2001, Cree 2013). Although seemingly against the profession’s values and ideals, several authors argue that the historical and contemporary contexts of social work include both social care and control, and the two are identified as being intertwined and interrelated (Camilleri 1996, Fook 2002, Cree 2013, Hauss & Schulte 2009, Sheppard 2006), a complexity that Franklin & Parton’s research did not adequately explore.
In their analysis, Franklin & Parton (1991) and Winter (1992) argue that the increase in media criticism directed towards social workers during the 1980s parallels the rise of neoliberal ideology in the UK. The authors found strong parallels between the critiques of the profession in the news media and those directed towards the Keynesian idea of the welfare state, especially in relation to the level of intervention and effectiveness. Winter (1992) suggests that the negative media coverage is linked to a ‘crisis of hegemony’ in British society. Winter (1992) argues that an ideological shift in the UK towards neoliberalism and the New Right in the 1980s affected media reporting, which identified social workers as an extension of the welfare state. Galilee (2005) writes that closely aligned to Thatcherism, this neoliberal doctrine prioritised the market and individual freedom. This ideology emphasised the failure of the evils of state intervention, suggesting that the ‘British way of life’ was being threatened. In response, a series of ‘folk devils’ were created who ‘came to represent those whose jobs, outlooks, attitudes and practices reflected the principles of social democracy and who were therefore perceived as undermining the traditional virtues of society’ (Winter 1992, p. 8). Several authors have identified a conservative and neoliberal bias and the lack of diversity in media ownership as the main source for these attacks (Mendes 2001a, 2008a; Winter 1992; Galilee 2005). Franklin & Parton (1991) also suggest that social work embodies the leftist ideological understandings by focusing on structural factors that are in stark contrast to the individualistic assumptions of neoliberalism, although this simplistic dichotomy is highly contested, especially in light of the radical critiques of the time (Allan et al. 2009).

UK social work researcher Meryl Aldridge (1990, 1992 & 1994) has conducted one of the most in-depth and theoretically informed analyses on this topic. Aldridge (1990) argues that the belief that the profession has received biased and harsh media coverage is entrenched among workers, beginning to identify the existence of a dominant and unquestioned assumption. Aldridge (1994), in her research, explored the complexity of the issue by analysing which voices are identifying the problem and the theoretical frameworks used to understand the role of media in society. Advocating for a pluralist model to understand media influence, Aldridge (1994) examined, as Wroe (1988) and Franklin & Parton (1991) had done previously, what is involved in the process of making a social event newsworthy, in particular focusing on the need for tragedy and drama. Aldridge (1994) critically analysed
the difference in reporting on the issue from social work academic journals and the social work trade press.

As exemplified by Mawby et al. (1979), from the very beginning, academic research tends to find a greater degree of moral complexity with regard to social work coverage, whilst the trade press has long argued for the existence of a systemic attack on the profession from the conservative news media. Aldridge (1990, 1994) concludes that the majority of the voluminous amounts of trade press articles do not provide a clear approach to the underlying assumptions in their arguments, particularly regarding the independence of the journalist within an institutional context and the role of the news media in society. Aldridge (1994) provides solutions to the perceived crisis by urging social workers to better understand the material interests of the media and that change needs to occur by building better relations with local media and understanding the process, rather than attempting to re-educate media corporations.

The last decade of writings in the UK have been predominantly driven by the trade press, with a lack of postgraduate or peer reviewed literature on the topic. In the 2000s, online groups and public awareness campaigns such as the Social Work Task Force (Edmondson 2013), Social Work in Film and Television and their twitter feed (SWIFT 2013), The Monitor (Community Care 2013), Stand Up Now for Social Work Campaign (Community Care 2009) and the Community Care (2013) website became strong advocates for the profession by conducting analysis and research, promoting their findings through social media. While there are extensive writings on the issue, the majority of the research conducted is quite narrow in focus, with methodologically unclear media analyses and quantitative surveys (Jerrom 2005, Zugazaga et al. 2006).

In recent years Community Care (2009) has carried out several research projects. In 2009 they studied the UK news media and found that national press coverage of social work is mostly negative and about crisis situations. Analysing 345 articles published in thirteen national newspapers during the first quarter of 2009, the research found that ‘54% were negative, 38% objective and 8% positive’ (Lombard 2009). The findings are problematic with the authors not detailing their methods of analysis or identifying what constitutes ‘objective’ journalism. This study is an example of the poorly theorised manner in which this topic has been researched. Community Care has been one of the few social work
organisations to actively seek the input from practising social workers, rather than theorise the potential impacts. Of relevance, they conducted a magazine poll of one thousand UK social workers in 2000 and found that 90% of respondents felt that negative reporting creates hostility from the general public, with 80% blaming it for increasing mistrust from service users (Neate 2000). Furthermore, a follow-up survey of three thousand social workers in 2005 found that 92% thought that staff morale was damaged by the way the media reports on social care (Jerrom 2005).

While over the last few years there continues to be literature on the topic (Gaughan & Garrett 2010; Stack 2010; UNISON 2012), the most significant piece of writing was the Munro report into child protection in the UK (Munro 2012). Due to continued public scrutiny regarding child protection services after the death of Peter Connelly (‘Baby P’), who in 2008 died at the hands of his mother and stepfather after suffering more than fifty injuries over an eight-month period, the UK government commissioned Professor Eileen Munro to conduct an independent review of child protection services (Munro 2011). The final report was published in 2011 and concluded that the service had become overly prescriptive and bureaucratic, limiting professional judgement and putting children at risk (Munro 2011). The document has a section on the public image of social work and the role of news media, which acknowledges the negative press coverage and strongly recommends that the profession and relevant organisations need to become better advocates and learn to work with the news media. The recommendations of the report have been far-reaching and some elements are already being adopted by governments, professional associations and agencies (Cooper 2012).

In response to the concerns raised in the Munro report, the UK College of Social Work commissioned the Centre for Health Communication Research (CHCR) at Buckinghamshire New University to research the experiences of social workers dealing with the media and unethical journalistic behaviour (CHCR 2012). A questionnaire was completed by 740 members of the college and a small number of interviews were conducted that were analysed through statistical and thematic analysis. The research found that 20% of those surveyed believed that media coverage in the UK was ‘completely unfair and inaccurate’ and that 71% thought that in general media reporting is ‘pretty unfair and inaccurate’ (CHCR 2012). The findings are consistent with previous studies, including identifying how negative
portrayals impact worker confidence and recruitment, but they provide some interesting
degrees of complexity and detail. When surveyed, over 50% of social workers who had
experienced media coverage of their practice believed that the representation was ‘fair and
balanced’ and ‘reasonably or completely accurate’, in contrast to the initial findings. The
open text section of the survey and phone interviews yielded the most interesting
information as they capture how news media portrayals of the profession impact workers
on a daily basis. The research documents the experience of 100 workers that have dealt
with unethical journalists and how this impacts their practice, citing examples of ‘illicit
attempts at obtaining information, bullying and manipulation’ (CHCR, p. 13). While the
methods, concepts used (what is balanced reporting?) and the lack of a theoretical basis
limits the depth of knowledge regarding the experience of workers, this research is
somewhat unique in attempting to move beyond perception and document experience.

In 2015 Warner (2015) explored the relationship between child protection, public attitudes,
political processes and the news media. In one of the most recent pieces of work, the
author discusses the topic through the concept of ‘emotional politics’. Focusing primarily on
the political aftermath of the ‘Baby P’ case and the Leveson Inquiry, Warner (2015) has
provided an innovative approach by focusing on the deeper process at work during periods
of media and public outage at child protection practices. Warner argues that the focus on
child protection failures can be understood at ‘a deeper cultural level as an attempt to
define a nation’s idealised sense of who “we” are collectively in the face of a child’s
suffering’ (Warner 2015, p. 43). In relation to social work, the author suggests that the
profession is preoccupied with its own media and that attempting to convince the media to
portray positive news stories is unlikely to be successful. In moving forward, she suggests
that energies need to be focused on how the media represents the people with whom social
work comes into contact, instead of the profession itself. Warner (2015) provides a
thorough analysis of the topic, but the focus is very much on the larger politics at play and
not necessarily how it impacts social workers, their identity and the professional project.

In summary, the UK literature on the topic has been extensive, but clearly divided amongst
academic journals and the trade press. Whereas the trade press argues for a continued
campaign of unfair reporting, journal articles have suggested that this may not be the case.
Regardless of source, the majority of the literature does not provide a consistent theoretical
understanding of the relationship between social work and the news media. Furthermore, the review was unable to identify a journal article or research project that analysed the media and workers’ experience during the same time period presenting clear opportunities for future research. This section provided a chronological overview of the UK literature; the gaps in knowledge will be explored in greater depth in the concluding sections of this chapter.

3.4 Research in North America

In North America, the writings on the relationship between the media and social work can be traced back to the late 1950s and, as opposed to the UK, the emphasis is less on specific cases and more on the role of the media in creating public awareness of the profession (Kadushin 1958; Pollak 1961). A key theme in the literature, predominantly from the US, is that public approval is intrinsically linked to effective practice in its capacity to influence the recruitment of new workers and fostering the credibility of the profession. The struggle for public and professional recognition has a long history in the USA, with the Abraham Flexner address of 1915 challenging the professional status of social work being a significant chapter (Bisman 2004; Flexner 1915; Meinert, Pardeck & Kreuger 2000). By the mid-1960s the literature focused on the public image of social work but a shift started to occur towards exploring this specifically for workers in a child protection role (Weinbeger 1967). Gough (1996) argues that while media reporting of child abuse is not a recent phenomenon (media interest can be traced back to the New York Times coverage of the Mary Ellen case in the 1870s), the 1960s marked a considerable shift in public awareness. As Goddard & Saunders (2001) write, it was the ‘re-discovery’ of child abuse by Dr. Henry Kempe and colleagues in 1962 in his article ‘The Battered-Child Syndrome’ in the Journal of the American Medical Association (Kempe et al. 1962) that raised public and professional consciousness of this issue. Kempe’s work challenged doctors’ ‘emotional unwillingness ... to consider abuse as the cause of the child’s difficulty’ (1962, p. 18). The work resulted in widespread interest in the issue of child abuse across the USA, UK and Australia (Mudaly & Goddard 2006). Dr Kempe’s seminal work challenged the general understanding and led to deeper public and professional scrutiny as to the role of the social work profession in preventing child abuse. The literature and research mirrored this shift as the focus changed from being generally
about the lack of public awareness about social work, to critiquing the narrow definition of the profession in the media within the field of protective services.

In the US, literature does not seem to be crises driven. While the US news media provided coverage of child abuse and child protection cases, the literature from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s does not reflect the persecution concerns raised in the UK trade press. The focus is on the need for improved public awareness of the profession and understanding what role the media plays, amongst others factors, in promoting an erroneous view of practice but not necessarily negative (Reid & Misener 2001; Condie et al. 1978). Clearfield (1977) studied the professional self-image of social workers by interviewing workers from three National Association of Social Workers (NASW) chapters. While the author found that the overall self-image of social workers was positive, Clearfield (1977) argues that stereotypic images of the profession have become part of the professional folklore. The author believes that these images are primarily created by portrayals of social work in the media. Clearfield (1977, p. 24) writes that ‘Although some aspects might be considered positive, the portrait of the profession drawn by newspapers, motion pictures, television and other media appears predominantly negative. A stereotyped image that is more nearly negative than positive appears to have become accepted.’

In the 1980s and 1990s there were very few journal articles, books or papers published on the topic, which was in contrast to the UK. Of significance was Brawley’s (1983) book that theoretically explored the relationship between mass media and human services. While not specifically about social work, the emphasis was on the role the media plays in service delivery in the human services and emphasising how workers in this field need to better understand the influence. Brawley (1983) argues that the mass media is pivotal for public relations, public education and prevention activities, seeing the media as a valuable way of promoting and supporting their services.

During this period, Andrews (1987) made a significant contribution to the scholarship on the topic, which although not about the news media, was still highly influential as it started a trend of US social workers analysing the entertainment media. Andrews (1987) researched the portrayal of the social work profession in the short-lived television series *East Side/West Side* (1963–1964), focusing on the role that the NASW played as a consultant on the series.
The television series, which depicted the daily struggles of a social worker in New York City, continues to be championed as an excellent depiction of the profession in the entertainment media (Freeman & Valentine 2004). Conducting content analysis of the scripts, reviews and responses from social workers at the time, Andrews explored the success of the NASW’s attempt to build a partnership with a media outlet in achieving an accurate representation of the profession. Andrews (1987) contests the idea that social work has a bad image, arguing that it is possibly incorrect but not necessarily negative. The author concludes by supporting the need for continued emphasis and understanding on the profession’s public image.

Despite the lack of publications during this period, the NASW took action and proactively addressed the professional concerns of the past few decades (Prasad 2006). From the mid-1980s onward the NASW developed television advertisements, radio spots, media releases, recruitment materials and also promoted social workers as media consultants (Davenport & Davenport 1997). In 1997 the NASW executive director, Josephine Nieves (Nieves 1997, p. 2) said, ‘Little troubles professional social workers more than the less-than-accurate image the public seems to have of our profession, acquired unfairly and based on misinformation’ highlighting this as a key area of concern. Through the NASW’s National Communications Network, they also focused on Hollywood by providing consultation, industry awards and support for filmmakers depicting social workers on film. In 2009 the NASW created the website SocialWorkersSpeak.org in order to ‘critique and improve the way social workers and social issues are covered in the news media, and portrayed in the entertainment industries.’ It has been argued that this proactive strategy has helped further solidify social work’s professional status in the US (Davenport & Davenport 1997).

The 1990s saw only a few publications with the focus being on the public’s attitude towards the profession. In their article, Kaufman & Raymond (1996) argue positive coverage would provide support for workers in maintaining programs, having services used and valued, and contributing to public debate. The authors propose that the large majority of the population have not had contact with anyone whom they identified as a social worker (Kaufman & Raymond 1996), as opposed to the other caring professions such as teachers, doctors and nurses. As Reid & Misener (2001) write, while public perception has long been viewed as an area of concern, only a few studies explore how the profession is portrayed in the media.
The only significant media analysis conducted during the 1990s was done by Davenport & Davenport (1997) who gathered 130 news items over a six-month period. The methods used were not identified beyond content analysis. The research found that social work coverage in the US tended to be more positive than negative, but as stated, the research used a sample of convenience and lacked substantial rigour or clarity in its methodology and methods (Davenport & Davenport 1997).

The last decade was marked by an increase in publications with a particular emphasis on film and television (Freeman & Valentine 2002, 2004; Gibelman 2004). The literature during this period focuses on three different themes: social work in the entertainment media, social work in the news media and how media coverage affects workers. Building on the work of Andrews (1987), several authors have analysed how the profession is portrayed in fiction on film and television (Freeman & Valentine 2002, 2004; Gibelman 2004; Murdach 2006). This is unique when compared to other countries and it may be related to the role of film and television as a key identifier of national cultural identity. Gibelman (2004) analysed three television shows featuring social workers in the early 2000s, arguing that the shows convey ‘an anti-professional, disrespectful image of social workers’ (2004, p. 332). Gibelman’s (2004) piece maintains the trend in the literature to conclude by providing pathways for social workers to ‘get the message out there’ and learn to work with the media.

In two separate research articles, Freeman & Valentine (2002, 2004) investigated the images of social workers in general practice (2004) and specifically working in child welfare services (2002) on film. Conducting a thematic analysis of forty-four films from 1938 to 1999, the authors focused on how clients and service providers were presented. In their findings the authors argue that film presents a highly gendered, racially biased and stereotypical view of the profession serving to maintain social order and the status quo. Freeman & Valentine (2002) strongly advocate for the profession to take an active role in the construction of social workers in film and present practice in a light that is more aligned to the core professional values. While praising Freeman & Valentine’s (2002) pioneering research, Murdach (2006) argues that it lacks a theoretical framework that focuses on the gendered presentation of social work as ‘women’s work’, including ideas about how much the negative representation is linked to larger issues of sexism and misogyny, and suggested
alternative theoretical understandings that can contribute to the topic (McPhail 2004). As will be raised in the concluding sections of this chapter, Murdach’s (2006) work highlights the ontological, epistemological and methodological confusion that is present in the majority of the research.

In exploring the US news media, there are only a small number of studies from the past decade (Henning 2006; Marron 2003; Reid & Misener 2001). Reid & Misener (2001) conducted the most extensive studies by comparing the image of social work in newspapers in the US and the UK. They sampled twenty constructed weeks randomly drawn from 60 major daily newspapers over a four-and-a-half-year period, resulted in 399 articles that made a mention of social work. Stories were coded initially on a ten-point positive to negative scale and the type of story and field of practice were further analysed to determine the portrayal (Reid & Misener 2001). The authors found that ratings of the portrayal of the profession were mostly positive in the US, and that in contrast, more stories had negative than positive ratings in the UK. Confirming the findings from previous research, in both contexts stories about child protection were rated more negatively than other fields of practice. In analysing the positive images, the researchers discovered that this occurred where workers were portrayed as experts or innovators. The authors conclude by stating that ‘social work does appear to have a serious image problem in the UK press ... our results suggest that the US press treats social work much more kindly’ (Reid & Misener 2001, p. 198). Also as part of a Master’s thesis, Henning (2006) conducted a feminist analysis of female social workers on television and found that the images construct a negative stereotype that did not reflect the lived experiences of Canadian social workers and perpetuated patriarchal values.

Of note is a contribution to the issue in the US in a journal article by Tower (2000), a social work educator and academic. In suggesting possible solutions to the ‘crisis’, Tower (2000) advocates for the incorporation of media training into social work practice. Tower (2000) argues that media creation and influence needs to become a part of university curriculum as it can serve as a vehicle to meet social work aims, including advocacy, public education, recruitment, therapy and research. Tower’s work is similar to Berkovic’s (1990) PhD thesis in Australia that will be explored in greater depth in the next section.
For all the years that there have been writings on the topic, it was only in the last six years that researchers actually interviewed social workers in the USA. Two key research studies were conducted exploring how media coverage of the profession affects social workers. In 2006, Zugazaga et al. completed a quantitative study of social workers’ perceptions of the depiction of social work in the news and entertainment media. A random sample of 665 qualified social workers, who were members of the NASW Florida Chapter, were surveyed regarding how they felt the profession was portrayed in the media on a set of paired adjectives comprising nine semantic differential scales (Zugazaga et al. 2006). Findings showed that the surveyed social workers believed the profession is depicted negatively in both news and entertainment media. The authors argue that the lack of a positive self-regard has detrimental impacts on practice, worker confidence and recruitment numbers. The research does not analyse the media and uses quantitative methodology and methods to measure attitudes. More recently, Carmona (2011) conducted a qualitative study examining how media coverage of child abuse cases affected social workers. This research consisted of semi-structured interviews with fifteen social workers employed by the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS). The findings showed that workers believed that the DCFS is generally portrayed negatively in the media and that these negative portrayals result in workers ‘feeling disheartened, with a few cases overshadowing the many accomplishments of the department’ (Carmona 2011, p. 1). The interviewed workers reported that the negative media portrayals resulted in frustration and identified the need for substantial and systemic change to ‘balance the misrepresentations’, without any exploration of what balance actually means.

The literature from North America (mainly the US) tends to focus on greater awareness of the general public’s understanding of the profession and what role the media plays in this process. As with the majority of research, the findings have lacked clarity and consistency in articulating their theoretical understanding of the relationship between social work and the media.

3.5 Research in Australia/New Zealand

From its outset, social work in Australia and New Zealand has been influenced by the developments of the profession in North America and UK (Allan et al. 2009; Morley et al.
2013), so it is of no surprise that the literature has followed a similar path. While the impact of news media portrayals of the profession has been identified as an area of interest in Australia (Mendes 2001a, 2008a; Petre 1990), and to a lesser degree in New Zealand (Stanfield & Beddoe 2013), the review found a scarcity of local research on the topic. From the very first volumes of the *Australian Journal of Social Work* (which would later be renamed *Australian Social Work*) the impact of news media on practice became a recurrent theme. In a 1953 journal piece titled ‘Child Welfare in Victoria’, social worker Margaret Kelley advocates for a review of the protective system and legislation. In the piece, Kelley (1953) makes a specific mention of the destructive and unfair criticism in the news media towards voluntary organisations whose workers are one of the few institutions attempting to deal with the issue of child abuse.

The recent articles by Lawrence Turner in the Melbourne ‘Herald’ were resented by some of the voluntary organisations as unfair criticism. I think that it ill behoves us to criticise, destructively, these organisations as they are doing our work for us; after all, we are the State. (Kelley 1953, p. 16)

Throughout the past fifty years the journal *Australian Social Work*, and in more recent years the *AASW Bulletin*, have made repeated references to the role that the negative news media portrayals play in shaping practice, especially child protection (AASW 2012; Cheron-Sauer 2011; Friedewald 2008; Lonne 2009; Mendes 2001a, 2008a, 2008b; Petre 1990). Similar to the UK, the writings, which are mostly of an editorial nature, have focused on the negative representation of the profession and the overuse of child protection stereotypes and failures (Mendes 2001a, 2008a). As will be explored in the next section, the fact that so much has been written about the negative coverage, although the topic has never been adequately researched, is argued to be evidence of a dominant and taken-for-granted assumption present in much of the Australian peer reviewed and trade press literature on the topic.

While there are references to several social work cases throughout the years, the literature appears to be marked by three events that resulted in increased media scrutiny of social work: the 1961 Melbourne University and the 1981 Sydney University ‘public attacks’ on the influence of Marxist thought in social work education, and the Victorian Daniel Valerio child
abuse case of 1990. Social work academic Phillip Mendes has been the most prominent writer on this topic in Australia, addressing the impact of the three cases mentioned previously (Mendes 2001a; 2001b). Mendes’ articles conduct a degree of media analysis through case studies (Mendes 2001a; 2001b), but it is his work on the impacts of two historical examples of ‘public attacks’ on social work by the now defunct Bulletin magazine from 1961 (Crawford 1961) and 1981, written by the former prime minister, Tony Abbott (1981), that provide the most in-depth analysis. In both articles, social work academics (in 1961 at Melbourne University and 1981 at Sydney University) were accused of promoting socialist thought to their students (McIntyre 1981). Mendes (2001b) suggests these ‘attacks’ had both short-term and long-term impacts, including how it damaged the professional status of social work and discouraged the AASW from becoming more publicly involved in social reform activities in the years after (McIntyre 1981). The AASW’s political inaction during this time also became part of the radical critique discussed previously.

Mendes (2008a) has also written about the agenda setting role of the Victorian news media and how this affects social work practice. Mendes’ argues from a general critical perspective that the corporations that own the majority of Australian news media (Fairfax and News Ltd) have a conservative agenda that is reflected in their hostility towards social workers. The author highlights manifestations of this criticism in the local press, and explores some of the reasons why social workers experience disproportionate media censure, including the need for newsworthiness and conservative bias. Mendes (2001a) writes that in Victoria an extensive 1987 media campaign on child abuse and the 1990 Daniel Valerio case contributed to a major restructuring of Victorian child protection services, including a large increase in resources (Goddard & Carew 1993; Goddard & Saunders 2001). Mendes (2001a) advocates for a more proactive social work response to news media coverage citing the 1997 example of the Victorian branch of the AASW’s response to media scrutiny of workers. In that instance the AASW challenged the perceived unfair critique of the profession through direct interaction with print and broadcast news, through letters to the editor and editorial pieces, and the development of the Child Protection and Child Welfare Issues Group, which provided advocacy and support for workers in the field of child protection and regular forums for discussion (Mendes 2001a). Mendes (2001a) argues that for a period of time this resulted in the Victorian Branch becoming a contact point for journalists.
promoting the professional status of the profession. It appears the group has not continued, as there is no current record of its existence.

The research in Australia has focused on social workers in the field of child protection. Goddard, Saunders & Liddell (1993, 1995 & 2001) have written extensively about child abuse in Australia concentrating on the role that the media plays in creating public awareness. Their work has also explored the negative media portrayal of social work as child protection officers, but to a smaller degree. Goddard & Saunders (2001) analysed the Victorian public policy impacts of the legislation by tabloid that resulted from the death of two-year-old Daniel Valerio in 1990 (Goddard & Saunders 2001). On the 8 September 1990 Daniel Valerio died from injuries caused by his stepfather, despite numerous agencies being involved and several professionals, including teachers, police, doctors and social workers, noticing the clear signs of abuse (Mudaly & Goddard 2006). In Victoria the news media coverage of the death of Daniel Valerio had significant impacts on social policy relating to social work.

As Goddard & Liddell (1993) argue, when the Liberal-National coalition was elected to government in Victoria in October 1992, its stated policy was one of clear opposition to mandatory reporting, but this was changed six months later. Goddard & Liddell (1993) argue that the dramatic change was due in part to the considerable campaign by the Herald Sun that included: ‘unprecedented’ (1993, p. 25) coverage of child abuse with Daniel’s bruised face appearing in the papers daily; the coverage of the trial being turned into a campaign by the Herald Sun entitled Save our Children; and active coordination with talk back radio focusing on the failure of the twenty professionals that had been involved in the case and advocating for mandatory reporting (Goddard & Saunders 2001). While social workers were not included in the mandatory reporting policy, it is proposed that the media coverage shaped the context of practice by creating policy that limited workers’ capacity for professional judgement, favouring highly prescriptive roles (Goddard & Saunders 2001).

In recent years the AASW has followed the example of the NASW and BASW in addressing the concerns of their members by taking a more proactive approach to the issue. In a response by the AASW to a member’s letter drawing attention to the lack of media profile for the profession, the association representative detailed the current efforts and
challenges faced (AASW 2012). The AASW spokesperson argued that the AASW’s response to social issues needs to be well researched and endorsed, and that this takes considerable time, not meeting the fast turnaround of news cycles. The shortage of staff to address public affairs is identified as a key hindrance in the association’s attempt for a higher public profile. The AASW requests that members who are passionate and interested in representing the profession in a public domain need to become more active within the organisation and externally. The 2010 Better Access campaign, in which the AASW along with other organisations successfully lobbied to keep social workers under Medicare cover, is cited as an example of effective engagement with the news media by social workers, but the positive result could be critiqued for being purely out of self-interest. In recent years the appointment of new National President Karen Healy has increased the focus of the AASW’s engagement with the media and this has led to several news articles quoting the AASW directly (Healy 2012; Healy 2013; Leitmann 2013; Wilson 2012).

In Australia, two postgraduate studies have been carried out exploring social work and the media. In 1990 Sarah Berkovic completed a PhD thesis titled, The Mass Media, Social Problems and Social Work Practice: a neglected concept in social work education. In it Berkovic studied the relationship between social problems, the role of the media in contributing to public understanding and the implications for the profession. The main goal of the research was to provide a theoretical basis to argue for the inclusion of media studies as part of the social work curriculum. Using social constructionist thought, the thesis provides a range of theoretical frameworks to understand the media. Primarily, it analyses four approaches to social work and explains how each could use the media to achieve its professional goals. The thesis concludes by providing a framework of a curriculum. Although written twenty-five years ago, it is thorough in its approach and provides a plurality of theoretical frameworks to understand the topic and underscores the imperative for including media theory in social work education (Berkovic 1990).

Of relevance is a PhD thesis completed through the School of Social Work at the University of South Australia by Zufferey (2006, 2007), looking at the construction of dominant discourses about homelessness in the media, policy and social work practice. As part of her research the author also looked at how dominant discourses about homelessness in news media are resisted and/or reflected in social work practice discourses using a mixed
methods approach incorporating media analysis and interviews. The research included a content analysis of seven Australian newspapers over a three-year period and single-session interviews with thirty-nine social workers in the field of homelessness in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney. The research found that ‘individualism is central to many of the dominant discourses evident in the print media, social policy and social work practice.’ (Zufferey 2007, p. ix). The thesis explored both subjective and discursive elements of this social phenomenon and was highly influential in the development of this study.

There have been two unpublished undergraduate theses in Australia, including Weston (1980), Heath (1996), but due to the limited accessibility of these documents, only the titles and abstracts are available. As part of my undergraduate degree in social work, I completed a minor research project exploring how the profession was portrayed in the media during a specific case. The sample was small (twenty-seven relevant articles) and covered one month of media coverage. The findings showed that the majority of the news media focused on child protection officers and looked at failures of the system, health sector and judicial, rather than the workers or professions (Cordoba 2008). The recommendations of the research emphasise the need for greater awareness of the portrayal of the profession in the media and served as the basis for this thesis (Cordoba 2008).

A review of the literature in Australia shows that while the media’s portrayal of the profession and the impact on practice is identified as an issue of significance, there is an absence of research that examines not only how the profession is constructed, but also how it affects workers. The lack of Australian research on the topic, despite the numerous mentions in the literature (AASW National Bulletin Summer 2012; Cheron-Sauer 2011; Friedewald 2008; Lonne 2009a, 2009b; Mendes 2001a 2008a; Martin 2010; Petre 1990) which tend to draw upon UK research, is argued to be evidence of a dominant and entrenched assumption whose local relevance has never been fully explored or deconstructed. The Australian Social Work journal, AASW Bulletin, AASW media releases and AASW social media continue to identify this as a relevant issue but they do not substantiate or further explore the claims, creating a clear opportunity for further research.
3.6 Absence of knowledge

A review of the literature clearly identifies that how the media (and in particular the news media) affects workers and practice has been of interest to social workers in the UK, North America and Australia for the past seven decades (Franklin & Parton 1991, 2001; Galilee 2005; Zugazaga et al. 2006). While each context is somewhat unique in its interpretation and understanding of the perceived problem, its significance is given general consensus. Yet despite all the writings and research, the literature would suggest that social workers are still pondering the same questions, offering similar solutions with seemingly very little change (Aldridge 1990; Galilee 2005). In order to identify the research gap that this study addresses, this section of the literature review will explore how the issue has been constructed by discussing what is known, what is not and the significance of new knowledge.

This literature review identified that the vast amount of writings from the social work community can generally be classified into two major groups: those that argue that the profession has received unusually poor media coverage, and those who do not. The idea that social work has received continued negative media exposure has been understood by several authors to be entrenched, and as a result, it is a point of constant attention in the trade press (Aldridge 1990, 1994; Andrews 1987; Mawby et al. 1979). As written previously, although there are several explanatory arguments as to why the negative press may occur, the common viewpoint has been that the profession is unfairly represented by the media and this is highly detrimental to practice. While this is a dominant argument, the opposing viewpoint presents a different picture.

As early as 1979 researchers have explored the concerns raised by workers, presenting findings that contradict the general consensus (Dalton 1988; Golding & Middleton 1982; Mawby et al. 1979; Wroe 1988). Conducting predominantly quantitative media analysis, the authors have found that the evidence for the belief that the profession has received uniquely poor and unfair coverage is far from conclusive (Aldridge 1990, 1994; Mawby et al. 1979). Researchers identified that even during major scandals, the portrayals were not uniformly critical; negative coverage was potentially highlighting serious ethical and
professional failings; the problem of poor media coverage and misrepresentation is not unique to the profession; positive media coverage is present; and that public opinion of the profession is ‘not as negative as the profession’s analysis of its coverage’ (Aldridge 1990, p. 611). Greater understanding as to the nature of these opposing views can be gained by examining where they have been published.

The divide is generally delineated according to articles published in the trade press and academic journals. Understanding the social function of each publication could provide a possible explanation for the incongruence. The trade press, through publications such as Community Care, Social Work Today, The Guardian – Social Care Network and the AASW Bulletin, has historically adopted a magazine format and style of writing as a way of engaging with workers and the general community to promote the profession. These publications advocate for the social work profession by highlighting its contribution to society and responding to criticism, including unfair attacks from the media. The function of the trade press is to promote rather than critique, and focusing so greatly on the idea of unfair coverage creates an ‘us versus them’ dichotomy that provides a narrative from which to champion the value of social work as a misunderstood force for good. Unfortunately, the absence of self-critique in the trade press has not allowed for the possibility that media coverage could be highlighting serious issues of unethical practice.

In contrast, academic journals allow for deeper exploration of issues relevant to social work, including the critical analysis of the social function of the profession, depressing and uninspiring as the findings may be. In relation to this topic, academic writing serves one of its purposes by analysing and testing the underlying assumptions that have driven much of the writings in the trade press. While the articles are more methodologically and theoretically rigorous, the research conducted uses quantitative methods (Aldridge 1990, Mawby et al. 1979) as a way of measuring media coverage without analysing why so many workers experience it negatively. Therefore, while the trade press and academic journals each promote different understandings of the relationship between the media and social work, this review identifies clear limitations and gaps in their respective knowledge.

While there is no general consensus on how the media works in shaping human subjectivity, any analysis of the impacts requires an explicit statement regarding the theoretical
framework used to understand this phenomenon as it forms the basis of the argument. It is beyond the scope of most of the writings to discuss the theoretical underpinnings of their arguments, yet the overt focus on the power and influence of the news media or the social work trade press (Aldridge 1990; Galilee 2005; Mendes 2001a) whilst overlooking the numerous elements and processes that compose and construct it, is a reductionist oversimplification that does not explore the complexity of the phenomena.

The general discussion is plagued by a lack of clarity and complexity in the theoretical frameworks used to understand the relationship between the media and social workers. While this is a critique commonly directed towards the trade press from social work researchers (most notably Meryl Aldridge 1990, 1994), they too overly simplify the role of individual and structural factors in human action. Aldridge (1990, 1994) has written about the twin underlying assumptions that inform the majority of the trade press’ arguments and corresponding solutions to the problem; a) they vilify and reify the power and influence of the neoliberal ideology that forms the basis of the privately owned media, and b) provide as a solution better public relation campaigns to educate journalists and build productive working relationships. Aldridge (1990) argues that this follows two contradictory understandings of human action by on the one hand reifying the news media as an all-powerful force and on the other hand arguing that better education for individual journalists is the solution rather than structural change.

Yet, for all the accusations of lack of theoretical clarity, Aldridge (1994) applies similar oversimplifications by negating the individual experience that forms the basis of the trade press writings, focusing on emphasising its role in maintaining the entrenched view. While the author rightly criticises the trade press for using approaches to media research that lack rigour (Aldridge 1990, 1994), there seems to be little accounting for the experience of workers and ultimately the function that the dominant assumption regarding the unfair portrayals serves. The social work trade press is produced by organisations that may have vested interests for promoting the idea that social work is under attack, yet Aldridge’s criticism, which implies that the social workers who read their publication are uncritical vessels for this ideology, is potentially oversimplifying a very complex issue.
The research has not analysed both the individual, focusing on subjectivity and identity formation, and the discursive and structural domains of the relationship between news media and social work leading to studies that fail to examine its intricacy. A well-argued theoretical basis provides a degree of understanding that could move the discussion away from the repetitive cycle it has been in for the past seven decades of doing quantitative media analysis to confirm coverage is poor and recommending better public relations as a solution. Inconsistencies in the literature highlight the difficulties in analysing this topic without a substantial exploration of the theoretical frameworks that inform such key issues as the macro and micro factors of human action.

A large proportion of the writing on the topic centres on the idea that the profession may be the victim of news media organisations and larger ideological interests (Galilee 2005; Mendes 2001a, 2001b). Explanatory factors are examined from several perspectives but the emphasis is on the inherent tension between the neoliberal values that shape the privately owned media and the leftist values that form the basis of social work (Mendes 2008a), although as argued previously, the extent to which social work exists independently from state policies is highly contested (Morley et al. 2013; Wallace & Pease 2011). In comparing the literature across the three cultural contexts, a key difference is the language used to construct and frame ‘the problem’. In the UK and Australia, possibly influenced by structuralist media theory, there is a focus on the attacks from the conservative news media (Galilee 2005; Mendes 2001a), whereas the US and Canada, using a more pluralist approach, have explored misrepresentations leaving a degree of ambiguity in terms of whether this could be intentional or malicious (Reid & Misener, 2001).

Research from the US seems to be more preoccupied with how inaccurate media portrayals, through possible journalistic ignorance, challenge the professional status of social workers, whereas in the UK and Australia the misrepresentations are seen as an ideological attempt to undermine the profession. This is possibly due to the high profile social work ‘failures’ that have received media coverage in the UK (for example, the Colwell, Beckford cases, Baby P) and Australia (the Valerio case), which is in contrast to the less crisis-oriented coverage of the profession in the US. Regardless of whether media coverage was unfair and vicious (Franklin & Parton 1991) or diverse and not simply critical (Aldridge 1991; Mawby et al. 1979), there is no doubt that social work in the UK has been the focus of increased media
coverage during the aforementioned cases. The sharp peaks in media interest on practice may have resulted in a stronger professional discourse of victimisation as associations and workers felt the need to defend their profession on a national platform. As the US has not experienced such intense periods of media scrutiny, it could be argued that their professional identity has developed without key instances of attacks and within broader sociopolitical contexts that have created a less defensive professional identity. Therefore, the focus has been on building a better public image proactively rather than responding to criticism defensively.

From the earliest writings (Kelley 1953), the negative effects on practice are identified as the reason why poor media coverage is problematic. This has been based primarily on the individual experience of workers who have used the trade press as an accessible medium to express these views. Several journal articles argue that news media coverage is not as negative as believed, yet there are vast amounts of texts in the trade press across all three cultural contexts describing the negative practice experiences due to poor coverage. While individual experience has been the catalyst, there are only a small number of research projects that have conducted in-depth interviews, beyond polls and surveys, to better understand the impacts (CHCR 2012; NALGO 1989; Stevenson & Parsloe 1978). The research focus has been predominantly on analysing the validity of the concerns raised by workers through media analysis as a way of finding ‘the truth’ about the ‘balance’ of positive and negative media images.

Research has neglected the complexity of how social workers experience media coverage of the profession, including how it shapes identity, and the possibility that it does not have to be explicitly negative for it to be perceived as such. For example, sometimes an omission in the news of the role that social workers played during a certain incident can be perceived as negative, yet this is not accounted for in the majority of media analysis. There are feasibility factors that may have limited the ability of researchers to engage directly with workers, as while this topic has been a point of continued interest, only a very small number of postgraduate research projects have been conducted. Several of the writings acknowledge the limited nature of their findings and the need for further research (Aldridge 1994; Mawby et al. 1979). This presents a gap in knowledge, as there has not been a substantial attempt to explain or better understand why trade press articles indicate that social workers
have experienced media coverage negatively, yet academic research has found that media coverage is not as poor as assumed.

The research that has examined how social workers experience news media has increased in recent years, yet as written previously, every new project is somewhat cyclical and redundant in its use of identical methods and expectedly yields the same results (Carmona 2011; Jerrom 2005; Zugazaga et al. 2006). The research uses quantitative methods to survey or interview social workers with the majority of the projects presenting similar findings that the news media is hostile to social work and this affects practice. Also, the research tends to utilise structured single-session interviews or surveys to generate their findings and while claiming to be open-ended and qualitative, they presuppose a positivist understanding about the interview method as a way of accessing ‘the truth’ about the relationship.

As argued by Silverman (2001) in his critique of interview methods, without the proper reflection or critique, even the most open-ended interview can provide repetition of cultural tales or dominant discourses over accounts that are more reflective of lived experience. The methods used in previous studies could be criticised for not acknowledging the power and authority of the researcher over the participants. From an anti-oppressive perspective, it is argued that in order to meet the demands and expectations of their role as interviewees, participants may have had to rely on dominant professional discourses and assumptions (social workers versus the news media) uncritically in order to provide an answer as the methods did not allow time for reflection. Furthermore, from an interpretivist approach, the findings could be criticised for making claims to the interview data as representative of ‘the truth’ rather than critically exploring them as potentially ‘context specific, invented to fit the demands of the interactive context of the interview’ (Miller & Glassner 2004, p. 132).

Therefore, the researchers who have completed the interviews and surveys do not appear to acknowledge how they are inevitably part of the studies they have conducted, and how their subject position impacts participants in potentially reproducing dominant discourses without critically reflecting on and deconstructing the findings.

There is a clear need for further research as understanding both how the media constructs the profession and how workers experience this coverage continues to be a highly neglected concept. Attempts to study this have used methodologies that have failed to explore the interconnected nature of both the subjective and discursive elements of this phenomenon.
They have also not afforded workers the capacity to critically reflect upon the issue and their practice. Quantitative surveys and structured interviews seem to continually reaffirm the dominant discourse of ‘us versus the news media’, but do not provide any further insight as to how or why this is a major issue. The most recent example of this is the previously mentioned CHCR research into how the media and unethical journalistic behaviour affect social work practice (CHCR 2012). When surveyed, 71% of social workers thought that media reporting of the profession is ‘pretty unfair and inaccurate’, yet in the same survey over 50% of social workers who had experienced media coverage of their practice believed that the representation was ‘fair and balanced’ and ‘reasonably or completely accurate’. Researchers were not able to fully account for the disparity, but this is potentially an example of workers uncritically reiterating a professional discourse that holds little relevance for their everyday practices. As argued previously, this could be due to the use of a research methodology that does not allow participants the space to critically reflect on their answers and therefore they need to draw upon discourses to provide a response to meet the demands of the situation.

In order to address the limitations of past research, this thesis uses a constructionist paradigm, as identified earlier, to inform the methodology and methods that focus on understanding both the identity and meaning making of workers, and deconstructing dominant assumptions. A social constructionist approach (Burr 2015; Jorgensen & Phillips 2002) is particularly relevant as it provides a framework for deconstructing the taken-for-granted assumption that is present in the Australian context. Applying this theoretical framework addresses the key limitations of the majority of the literature that has come before by contributing a more rigorous analysis of the individual and discursive factors of the role of news media in the social construction of social work.

3.7 Conclusion

The relationship between news media and social work practice has been of considerable interest to social workers in the UK, North America and Australia/New Zealand. The review of the literature identified that this is an issue of importance for the professional community, and while locally it is argued that the news media is unfairly critical and non-representative of the complexity that is social work practice in Australia, there has not been
any significant research to substantiate this claim. There is also a dearth of international research that explores the topic with the theoretical and methodological depth and rigour that something deemed so detrimental to the profession demands. Further research is therefore required to better understand the topic and move the discussion away from the repetitive cycle it has been in for the past seven decades of carrying out quantitative surveys and limited media analysis to confirm coverage is poor, and recommending better public relations as a solution. It is this significant gap in knowledge that this thesis will address.

Building on the theoretical approach and the research gap, Chapter 4 will present the research design of this study, including the strategy, methodology, methods and sites.
Chapter 4: Research design

4.1 Introduction

Building on the theoretical approach and the gaps in knowledge identified in the literature review, this chapter will detail the research design of this study. This will include an exploration of the research strategy, question, aims, methodology, methods, sites and limitations.

4.2 Research strategy, question and aims

i. Research strategy: Inductive

While constructionist theory provides a conceptual framework to understand the relationship between social work and the news media, in order to generate new knowledge Blaikie (2007) argues that researchers need to describe the logic used to carry out the inquiry, which is commonly identified as a research strategy (Lewis-Beck, Bryman & Liao 2004). A research strategy provides a path and style of reasoning that guides the researcher to determine how to understand the research problem, where to research and how to proceed (Arthur et al. 2012). In line with the constructionist underpinnings the research adopted an inductive research strategy. Broadly within a constructionist approach to social research, inductive reasoning begins by looking at data to develop ‘generalisations limited by time and space’ that aim to provide greater understandings about the focus of inquiry (Engel & Schutt 2010). As Bryman & Burgess (1994, p. 4) write, ‘The researcher begins with a rough definition of a problem or issue ... appropriate cases are examined and a possible explanation of the problem is formulated’.

An inductive approach was aligned with the aims of this research in exploring the relationship between social work and the news media by developing new understandings from the data itself, rather than a presupposed hypothesis.
ii. Research question

Building on the literature review (which identified the contribution of a constructionist approach to researching the topic) and the underlying social constructionist research paradigm detailed in previous chapters, the research looked at better understanding:

What relevance do news media portrayals of social work hold for the social construction of social work?

iii. Research aims

In order to answer the question, this study had three main aims:

a) **Aim:** Through a critical reflection process with twenty practising social workers, explore how news media portrayals of social work affect social workers at a personal and professional level

   **Method:** A critical reflection process consisting of reflection journals, interviews and group work

   **Site:** Practising Melbourne social workers

b) **Aim:** To document and analyse how social work is discursively constructed in the Melbourne print and online news media over a twelve-month period

   **Method:** Researcher and participant news media analysis

   **Site:** Twelve months of print and online news media

c) **Aim:** To develop new theoretical insights into the role of the news media in the social construction of social workers’ professional identity

   **Method:** Stages of theory development (Alvesson & Karreman 2007)

   **Site:** Research data
4.3 Methodology

As Blaikie (1993 p. 7) writes, methodology is ‘the analysis of how research should or does proceed ... it includes discussions of how theories are generated and tested ... what criteria they have to satisfy, what theories look like and how particular theoretical perspectives can be related to particular research problems’. The methodology section of a research project is a fundamental component as it serves as the conceptual link between how it understands the social phenomenon that is the focus of inquiry, and how to investigate it (Clough & Nutbrown 2012). The core theory, research question and aims presented two main and interconnected components: the micro social construction of social work and the macro discursive constructions of social work in the news media. Two suitable methodologies were therefore chosen that were consistent with the social constructionist and inductive underpinnings to explore the relationship: critical reflection and discourse analysis. Broadly both are understood to belong to a qualitative approach to research. Although mainly within a qualitative tradition, this research rejects a clear differentiation between qualitative and quantitative, rather the two concepts are seen to describe poles on a spectrum rather than separate entities (Bergman 2008).

The following section will detail why critical reflection and discourse analysis approaches were deemed suitable methodologies for answering the research question.

i. Methodology: Critical reflection

Fook & Gardner (2007) & Morley (2008) argue that critical reflection, as a form of reflexivity, can provide a methodological framework for approaching research and evaluation that can be used to complement many approaches. This research utilised the poststructuralist tradition of critical reflection as it is well aligned with the constructionist approach (Fook & Gardner 2007). Critical reflection as a methodology guided the research process and, in line with the theoretical underpinnings, also implied that researchers need to acknowledge the values from which they are operating in order to operate in socially just and inclusive ways (Fook 2002). As part of a larger approach to researching professional practice, a main purpose of a critical reflection methodology is to unearth how individuals participate in macro discourses (Fook 2002). Critical reflection is part of a broader approach to research
that seeks to understand professional practice in and of itself as a distinct social phenomenon (D’Cruz, Jacobs & Schoo 2009; Green 2008; Fook 2012). The main objective for this form of research is to understand the relationship between practice and knowledge in constructing professional practice (D’Cruz, Jacobs & Schoo 2009).

D’Cruz, Jacobs & Schoo (2009) argue that academics in this field have researched professional practice in most of the caring professions, including social work (Fook 2002), nursing (Benner 1984; Higgs & Titchen 2001; Mallik 2004), and occupational therapy and physiotherapy (Donaghy & Morss 2000). This area of research acknowledges that there is a common interest amongst caring professions in understanding what constitutes professional practice and the translation between theory and action, but that professions are not ‘homogenous monoliths’ and each has idiosyncratic and contextual forms of knowledge (D’Cruz, Jacobs & Schoo 2009, p. 4). Critical reflection is part of this larger approach to researching professional practice but explored from the diverse critical framework that is adopted by several schools of social work practice (Fook & Gardner 2007; Taylor & White 2006).

Fook & Gardner (2007) argue that critical reflection as a methodology emphasises researching as an integral part of, rather than separate from, practice. It extends core critical social work values and principles to research by concentrating on the unheard voices and encouraging collaboration and participation (Fook & Gardner 2007). Critical reflection as a methodological approach has also been influenced by the work of Reason & Bradbury (2001, p. 12) who argue that ‘research can be thought of not as an interruption of work, but as a means for furthering and developing the work we are already engaged in’. Furthermore, Mason’s (2002) idea of ‘noticing as research’, where practitioners are encouraged to critically reflect on their practice by paying attention to what happens in a systematic way so that the information collected can be used to generate change, has also been significant in the development of this methodology.

Critical reflection in research aims to create a conceptual space (Rossiter 2005) that seeks to explore and challenge ‘fixed and potentially restrictive ways of thinking and may indicate avenues for change’ (Fook 1996, p. 199). Fook (2012) argues that critical reflection is a process that first questions and then disrupts dominant structures, and relations, and lays
the ground for change. The process consists of three stages: construction, where participants describe their situation; deconstruction, where participants reflect on action; and reconstruction, where practice and theory is redeveloped (Fook 2002). This research further developed Fook & Gardner’s (2007) approach to critical reflection by incorporating Gidden’s (1979, 1993) theories on the role and function of the researcher (immersion in a form of life and the new rules for the sociological method), and expanding the critical focus on power towards the politics of recognition (Thompson 2006; Honneth 1996).

**The role of the researcher in critical reflection**

While there have been numerous writings about the critical reflection process and the role of the facilitator (Fook 2012; Fook & Gardner 2007), there is a lack of literature that explores the researcher’s role when using it as a methodology. In identifying the function of the researcher in the critical reflection process this research drew from Giddens’ (1979, 1993) extensive methodological work. Giddens’ (1993) ‘immersion in a form of life’ approach proposes that the objectivated knowledge that individuals use subjectively to conduct and make sense of daily interactions needs to be the primary focus of the social sciences. Therefore, it is impossible for the social researcher to describe the social world without drawing upon what social actors know. The processes involved within this research strategy can be highly diverse but dependent on the researcher being able to immerse themselves in the way of life of the groups or individuals that are the focus of study. Giddens (1993) argues that full immersion is not necessary, or practical, but it is essential that the researcher is involved enough to be able to participate to some degree. ‘Social scientists must draw on the mutual knowledge that social actors use to make sense of their activity. Without immersion there is no adequate understanding of what lies behind and structures overt behaviour ... social research has to deal with a social world that is already constituted as meaningful by its participants’ (Blaikie 2007, p. 96).

As a practising social worker in the Melbourne context with several years of direct practice experience, I position myself as being part of, and highly immersed in, the professional culture that is the focus of this study sufficiently so to understand the culture of the group, the mutual knowledge and general frames of meaning that are used by the participants. This is by no means a claim of full or absolute immersion as my role as a researcher places
me within a professional subculture that may be identified as different to their own by the participants. Regardless, it is evidenced by my professional background that I have sufficient understandings from which to research the relationship between practice and news media, and to facilitate the reflection process. The final section of Part One will explore in greater detail my own reflection and reflexivity, including further positioning myself within this research.

In terms of conducting the reflection process, this research also used Giddens’ (1993) proposed new rules for the sociological method.

Giddens (1979, p. 251) states that:

> It is right to claim that the condition for generating valid descriptions of a form of life entails being able to participate in it ... but it does not follow from such a conclusion that the beliefs and practices involved in forms of life cannot be subjected to critical assessment, including within this the critique of ideology ... We must distinguish between respect for the authenticity of belief, and the critical evaluation of the justification of belief. We must differentiate what I call ‘mutual knowledge’, from what might be called ‘common sense’. Mutual knowledge is not corrigible to the sociological observer ... Common sense is corrigible in the light of claimed findings of social and natural science ... we should not succumb passively to a paralysis of the critical will ... the critical evaluation of beliefs and practices is an inescapable feature of the discourse of the social sciences.

This research developed a critical reflection methodology that values the ‘mutual knowledge’ (Giddens 1979, p. 251) that the participants draw upon to understand the relationship between practice and the news media, but is also open to critiquing the ‘common sense’ or taken-for-granted assumptions about everyday activities. In line with this notion, the intent of this process was not to challenge what participants understand to be social work or the news media but rather engage in a process that proposed a critical evaluation of the justification of their beliefs about the media coverage and the possible impacts. This process began with the critical reflection research project and continued independently through the theory development work.
ii. **Methodology: Discourse analysis**

As Phillips & Hardy (2002) argue, discourse analysis is not simply comprised of a set of techniques for conducting structured qualitative investigations of text, it also involves a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language.

Discourse analysis tries to explore how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created in the first place and how they are maintained and held in place over time. Whereas other qualitative methodologies work to understand or interpret social reality as it exists, discourse analysis endeavours to uncover the way it is produced. This is the most important contribution of discourse analysis; it examines how language constructs phenomena. (Phillips & Hardy 2002, p. 6)

There are many approaches to discourse analysis. Phillips & Ravasi (1998) found that they could be categorised along two key theoretical dimensions. The first dimension concerns the relative importance of text versus context in the research. The second dimension concerns the degree to which power dynamics form the focus of the research (critical studies) versus studies that concentrate more closely on the processes of social construction that constitute social reality (interpretive structuralism). This is seen as a continuum, not a dichotomy (Phillips & Hardy 2002). The research combined elements of critical (Fairclough & Wodak 1997) and interpretive structural (Dunford & Jones 2000) discourse analysis as a methodology, with its focus on the constructive effects of macro discourses, presenting a viable methodological approach. The emphasis is therefore on context over text, and both a critical and constructionist approach. In exploring the macro-discursive contexts of this study, discourse analysis provides a methodological approach to research to examine how the profession is discursively constructed in the news media.

The next section of this chapter will explore the research sites used to generate and analyse the research data.
4.4 Research sites

Central to this study were two main concepts that were also the main research sites: Australian social work and the Australian news media. Building on the theoretical foundations, social work and the news media are identified as social constructs created by numerous social agents in discursive, historical, political and economic contexts (Payne & Askeland 2008).

Therefore, drawing upon the underlying theory, this thesis understands:

- **Research Site 1**: Social workers as social agents who are positioned within and shaped by macro objectivated discourses but also have the capacity to resist and challenge them through micro intrapersonal and interpersonal critical reflection

- **Research Site 2**: News media as a site for macro objectivated discourses

Having established the conceptual framing in Chapter 2, the following section will explore the research sites used to generate and analyse the research data, beginning with a contextual overview of the site.

i. **Research Site 1: Practising social workers**

**Contextual overview of social work in Australia**

It is important to acknowledge that there are many members of society conducting social work, which is work of a social and welfare nature, in social services and community welfare organisations. However, the focus is on the multifaceted social work professional identity as a formally trained profession whose graduates are eligible for membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW 2013). The *AASW Code of Ethics* (2010, Article 1.1) provides a general working definition, proposing that ‘the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing’. Regardless of the definition, what constitutes social work is highly contested and there is still substantial discussion and debate about what is ‘professional social work’.
There are approximately 16,000 social workers in Australia employed mainly in the health and community sector (61%) and government and administration and defence (27%) (Healy & Link 2012). Social work is a tertiary trained qualification and it is not a registered profession (Healy & Link 2012; AASW Website 2013). The need for registration is another contentious point with many groups rejecting the idea (Chenoweth & McAuliffe 2011; Morley et al. 2013). Currently there are twenty-nine schools of social work across the country and the profession is represented by the AASW, a monitoring and representative body, with approximately 9000 members (AASW Website 2015). Several authors argue that social work practice in Australia is quite varied and encapsulates individual, family, group, community, research and policy work (Allan et al. 2009; Fook 2012). Furthermore, as Healy & Link (2012) claim, the political orientation of practitioners covers the ideological spectrum from highly individualised approaches to practice to systemic advocacy and activism.

**Sampling method**

As a non-experimental design, non-probability sampling was used to determine the number and background of social workers to participate in the research. The focus was on the Melbourne context, engaging with workers in the metropolitan area. Non-probability sampling was used as it aims to generate new ideas and understandings over grand theories (Rubin & Babbie 2010). Therefore, twenty practising social workers working in Melbourne with two or more years’ experience (to allow for a more developed process of internalisation and externalisation of social work practice discourses) were recruited using a researcher guided snowball sample. Although the initial aim was to recruit thirty, that number was not achieved in part due to the longitudinal nature of this study, and despite a great amount of interest. Twenty was still deemed to be a suitable number of participants by the research team given the main aims and the qualitative, social constructionist framework. As a practising social worker, I started by recruiting workers from my professional networks and then asked participants to suggest other suitable candidates who were assessed for eligibility according to their experience and field of practice. This was followed by the development of a recruitment flyer (Appendix 3) that was sent directly to several agencies and organisations that employ social workers and also published in the AASW Bulletin and e-bulletin.
Social workers were recruited across the eight general fields of practice as identified by Alston & McKinnon (2005) in *Social Work Fields of Practice* to provide a broader understanding of how news media constructions are experienced in different practice contexts. While most fields were covered (see Table 3), gerontological social work was the only one absent in the sample, although several participants worked with clients sixty-five and over. Participants were asked to commit to the twelve-month research period that involved five to six hours of direct contact and the flexible nature of the journal. The number of social workers was chosen in order to explore different practice settings but still work with a feasible number of research participants.

**Social work sample group demographics (n = 20)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 18</td>
<td>n = 02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>25–34 years</th>
<th>35–44 years</th>
<th>45–54 years</th>
<th>55+ years</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>n = 10</td>
<td>n = 6</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years post qualifying</th>
<th>2+</th>
<th>5+</th>
<th>10+</th>
<th>15+</th>
<th>20+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>n = 5</td>
<td>n = 7</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td>n = 3</td>
<td>n = 3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job title</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>n = 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case worker</td>
<td>n = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsellor</td>
<td>n = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant program manager</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case coordinator</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case manager</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinician</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapeutic specialist</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing officer</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing professional</td>
<td>n = 1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Sample</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health care settings</td>
<td>n = 05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>n = 04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support services</td>
<td>n = 03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>n = 03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child protection</td>
<td>n = 02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug &amp; alcohol services</td>
<td>n = 01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing services</td>
<td>n = 01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigration services</td>
<td>n = 01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ethics approval

As the research project involved human participants, ethics approval was required. The project was deemed ‘low risk’ and granted ethics approval by the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network as a sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) on 22 February 2013 (see Appendix 4).

Attrition

Participant attrition has been identified by several authors as one of the major challenges for longitudinal studies, such as this one (Ahern & Le Brocque 2005; Bynner 2012; Rubin & Babbie 2010). Attrition is of significant relevance for research projects that examine the same individual at different stages over an extended period of time (Ahern & Le Brocque 2005). Several strategies were incorporated into this thesis to reduce participant attrition, which included: the choice of a group (tertiary qualified individuals) with generally low attrition rates (Ahern & Le Brocque 2005); the focus on positive engagement and relationship building strategies (Krysik & Finn 2010); the use of single, skilled interviewer (Krysik & Finn 2010); and participant reimbursement for their time, a $30 gift voucher (Rubin & Babbie 2010). Attrition was monitored closely, which was feasible due to the sample size. In implementing the strategies listed above, the intent was to build a working relationship with the participants in which factors that caused attrition could be understood and explored in greater depth. Furthermore, the aim of building rapport was to foster a trusting relationship so if a participant was not fully engaged by the process, we could have explored ways of being more flexible and accommodating. As part of the process, if participants chose not to continue with the research, an exit survey would have been provided in order to understand the factors that led to their departure. Ultimately, only one participant left the research before the interview due to health factors, which is evidence of the success of the aforementioned strategies.
ii. Research Site 2: Melbourne print and online news media

Contextual overview of the news media in Australia

Sawer, Abjorensen & Larkin (2009) argue that in Australia the news media landscape is concentrated to a degree that is unparalleled in Western democracies, in part due to the rise of neoliberalism and the deregulation of ownership laws. Two major media organisations own the majority of the news media, with News Ltd controlling approximately 70% of newspaper circulation, and Fairfax controlling another 21% (Rourke 2012). Several authors have cited the gradual decrease in media diversity and plurality of ownership over the last century, due to the rise of neoliberalism, as a cause for concern about the state of the Australian democracy (Sawer, Abjorensen & Larkin 2009). In 1923 there were twenty-six daily newspapers in Australia, with twenty-one different owners. Now, with the exception of Sydney and Melbourne, there are only two national ‘dailies’: The Australian and the Australian Financial Review. Melbourne has two further daily newspapers: News Ltd’s Herald Sun with a circulation of approximately 450,000 and Fairfax’s The Age with a circulation of approximately 150,000 (Audited Media Association of Australia 2013). The other significant player is the national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), providing television, radio and online news content. Readership of print news media has been decreasing in the past few years as online newspapers have become more popular, although according to recent data, print continues to reach more readers despite the decline (Newspaper Works 2015). The shift to online has challenged the business model of Australian media corporations as online content was initially introduced free of charge and subscription services have not been as successful as expected (Burrowes 2014).

Sampling method

The second research site was print and online news media in the context of present day Melbourne, Australia, as this is the cultural and general site of analysis for the whole thesis. In choosing the relevant texts for analysis, and in line with the previous writings, a theoretical sampling of news media sources was chosen according to their distribution and dissemination to large audiences (Roy Morgan 2012). As the focus of the study was on social workers as key social agents in the construction process, news media texts were chosen on
the basis that they would be easily accessible and a main source of information in the Melbourne context.

Putnam & Fairhurst (2001) argue that collection and management of data is problematic for discourse analysis. Given the number of news media texts that exist about social work and the social issues they engage with, the challenge was not finding the texts but deciding which texts to choose. As Phillips & Hardy (2002) write, the difficulty is then to identify a manageable, relatively limited corpus of texts that is helpful in exploring the constructions of social work. Discourse analytic research should use theoretical sampling to find important texts, for example, those that are widely distributed, as they will yield the most relevant findings (Phillips & Hardy 2002; Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2008). Furthermore, Phillips & Hardy (2002) argue that in using discourse analysis as a methodology, naturally occurring texts are considered a better source of data because they are examples of language in use. News media text is frequently used in discourse analytic studies because it is understood as naturally occurring and not research instigated discourse (Phillips & Hardy 2002).

The news media sources are detailed below in Table 4.

Table 4: Print and online news media sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News sources</th>
<th>State</th>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Fairfax</td>
<td>Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sunday Age</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Fairfax</td>
<td>Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.theage.com.au">www.theage.com.au</a></td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Fairfax</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>News Ltd</td>
<td>Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Herald Sun</td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>News Ltd</td>
<td>Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.heraldsun.com.au">www.heraldsun.com.au</a></td>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>News Ltd</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>News Ltd</td>
<td>Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian Magazine</td>
<td>National</td>
<td>News Ltd</td>
<td>Print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.abc.net.au/news">www.abc.net.au/news</a></td>
<td>National</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Online</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using the *Factiva* database and News Ltd and Fairfax archives for print and online news, content analysis was used to search for news stories mentioning the words ‘social work’
and/or ‘social worker/s’ over the twelve-month period between 1 February 2013 and 31 January 2014. The analysis identified 626 print and online newspaper articles, of which 459 were deemed relevant (Table 5). Articles were not used (n = 167) if it could be clearly identified that the term ‘social work’ was used to describe the broad act of charity work. The time period for analysis was chosen to coincide with the critical reflection process. As will be explored in the next section, the research findings were discussed and compared to workers’ analysis of news media coverage, focusing on similar news sources, during the same time period in the group workshops. This was to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic from two different approaches to research.

While it could be argued that there is some degree of public confusion as to the difference between a social worker and a child protection officer (Mendes 2001a), the focus was on the discursive construction of the social work profession rather than job descriptions or titles. Furthermore, while a social work qualification may be favoured, it is not required in order to be a child protection officer in Victoria (DHHS Website 2013). The key search terms served as a starting point and implied reference to social workers using other descriptors in news media (including job titles like child protection worker, community worker, drug and alcohol worker, case manager) and could be part of a future research project.

Table 5: Number of articles according to source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>theage.com.au</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Age</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><a href="http://www.abc.net.au/news">www.abc.net.au/news</a></td>
<td>61</td>
<td>13.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Herald Sun</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>news.com.au</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>theaustralian.com.au</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>heraldsun.com.au</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Age</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunday Herald Sun</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian Magazine</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A key limitation was the absence of television and radio news media content. This was a practical consideration due to the time-consuming nature of analysis and feasibility of accessing relevant radio and television news texts (given the search item limitations of Informit TVNews). The significance of print and online news media is supported by Chomsky’s (Chomsky & Herman 2004) theory that identifies a small number of print media sources (when written, online media was not as prevalent as it is today) that have an agenda setting (McCombs 2004) role for the news system as a whole. Chomsky (Chomsky & Herman 2004) uses the morning edition of *The New York Times* newspaper as an example and traces how what it prioritises as front-page news is then repeated by all other news sources (television, radio and print). Takeshita (Nabi & Oliver 2009; Takeshita 2006) argues that despite the plethora of choices for information, the mass and mainstream media continues to have an agenda setting function framing public debate. Furthermore, in relation to Australia, Cunningham (2010) proposes that despite the rise of other forms of media, there is little evidence to suggest that this has led to the democratisation of the news media. The local and contemporary relevance of Chomsky’s findings has not been researched.

4.5 Methods

Methods build on the underlying theory and methodology to present the specific techniques and procedures used to generate and analyse data in attempting to answer the research question (Blaikie 1993; D’Cruz & Jones 2014). As stated previously, within a qualitative, social constructionist approach, this study utilised two main and interconnected methodologies to address the three research aims: critical reflection for the analysis of micro subjectivities (research aim a.); discourse analysis for the analysis of macro objectivated discourses (for research aim b.); and in order to develop new theoretical insights, the data from these two processes was further analysed using a combination of these two methodologies (for research aim c.)
In addressing the aims, each approach used its own set of methods in analysing and developing theory for both micro and macro processes in the social construction of social work.

i. Research aim a.

Research aim: a. Through a critical reflection process with twenty practising social workers, explore how news media portrayals of social work affect social workers at a personal and professional level

Methodology: Critical reflection

Site: Practising social workers

Methods for generating data: Critical reflection journal, semi-structured interviews and group workshops.

Methods for analysing data: Thematic analysis

This section of the research deconstructed and critically explored, with twenty practising social workers, the role of news media constructions of the profession in the social construction of social work. The objective was to understand how the macro-discursive sphere (objectivated news media and social work practice discourses) enters into the micro-sphere of social work. In order to achieve this aim, as the researcher I worked with the twenty social workers to explore how news media of the profession affect the discursive (critically exploring their understanding of social work), interpersonal (worker-client relationships, multidisciplinary work and broader agency context) and the intrapersonal (including professional identity, self-confidence and self-worth) domains of their current practice (Reason & Bradbury 2001).

Influenced by Fook’s (2012), Gidden’s (1993), Reason & Bradbury’s (2001) and Thompson’s (2006) work, a collaborative critical reflection process was used. Qualitative method triangulation was used as a research strategy to achieve a more comprehensive understanding and reduce the oppressive potential of the presence of the researcher (Denzin & Lincoln 2005). Three methods: journal writing, semi-structured interviews and group workshops were used to provide a thorough and inclusive approach to researching this social phenomenon. The aim was not to validate data from each source but to use
varied methods to generate data that will bring different insights into the research (D’Cruz & Jones 2004). While there are numerous definitions about what constitutes triangulation, this research understands it as the use of multiple methods, procedures and theoretical perspectives to collect and interpret data about a phenomenon ‘in order to converge on an accurate representation of that particular reality’ (Brink 2003, p. 215). As Denzin & Lincoln (2005) argue, one of the most common forms of triangulation is the use of more than one data collecting technique or method to tap dimensions of the same phenomenon. In combining different methods, the research utilised the strengths of each while overcoming their perceived deficiencies (Denzin 1989). The three methods used supported participants to explore the topic in a manner that builds on their communicative strengths, be it written, conversational or group work.

As discussed previously, Silverman (2001) suggests that even the most open-ended interviews, while seductive in their anti-oppressive rhetoric, can provide repetition of cultural tales over personal accounts. The shift in recent years has been on understanding the interview process as a socially constructed phenomenon in and of itself. In writing about the limitations of the interview method, and adopting a strong relativist stance, Miller & Glassner (1997, p. 132) argue that ‘the problem with looking to these narratives as representative of some truth in the world, is that they are context specific, invented to fit the demands of the interactive context of the interview and representative of nothing more or less’. In drawing upon the constructionist underpinnings, this thesis acknowledges that researchers are undeniably part of the studies they conduct, and how this occurred will be discussed in greater depth in the reflexive sections. The interview and workshops are not seen as a means of obtaining an absolute truth about individual thought and experience. Rather, it is seen as a medium to create a co-constructed narrative between the interviewer and interviewee in which how news media shapes practice is deconstructed and explored.

The next section of this chapter explores the specifics of the critical reflection methods, further detailing the different stages. The research method was based on Fook’s (2012) critical deconstruction and reconstructive process, Fook & Gardner’s (2007) critical reflection process, Dadds & Hart’s (2001) practice research approach, Mason’s (2002) noticing as research and Reason & Bradbury’s (2001) cooperative inquiry process.
Methods for generating data (Aim a.)

Through triangulation, three separate methods (reflection journal, interviews and workshops) were used to generate data as part of the critical reflection process and in line with the critical reflection methodology.

Critical reflection journals:

Marlow identifies journals and logs as a commonly used research method to generate data (Marlow 2010). Marlow (2010) proposes two main forms of journals and logs (structured and unstructured) and two main uses for them in social work research: assisting the researcher to track their progress, and the other is for research participants to document their own thoughts and behaviours (Marlow 2010). The journal was used by participants in an unstructured manner guided by open questions that framed the area of inquiry. The aim was to allow for the journal to capture ‘a stream of consciousness type of data collection’ (Marlow 2010, p. 175).

Semi-structured interviews:

As D’Cruz & Jones (2004) write, interviews are one of the most commonly used methods in social work research due to the familiarity workers have with interviewing. Interviews can range from being highly structured to unstructured (Patton 1987). The interviews were semi-structured, as the interview guide provided a thematic frame for discussion. The interview guide approach to research provided some degree of structure but also enough flexibility that allowed for follow-up probing questions more akin to an informal conversational interview (D’Cruz & Jones 2004).

Group workshops:

In their critical reflection work, Fook & Gardner (2007) use workshops as the most common method for this process. The group workshop was influenced predominantly by a focus group approach to research interviews, which is a widely used method in social work and social science research (Shaw & Gould 2002). Shaw (1996) identifies three main advantages
to using focus groups for social research: the interaction of the group itself becomes a site for the analysis in the construction and negotiation of meaning, the group becomes a ‘collective corrective’ to the power imbalance that may be present between the researcher and participants, and they can provide a better understanding of consensus in the community that is the focus of study. Although the group is guided by a theme (the focus), it is widely argued that focus groups are a participatory research method (Kitzinger 1994). As Rubin & Babbie (2010) write, focus groups can bring a deeper level of understanding as group dynamics can reveal an aspect of the topic that the researcher had not thought about and may not have emerged during individual interviews.

The following section details each component of the critical reflection process.

**Critical reflection stages**

**Stage 1: Reflection journal (Construction)**

The main purpose of the first session was to begin to unearth, unsettle and examine fundamental and explicit assumptions (Fook & Gardner 2007). The aim was to establish the research participants’ understanding of the research topic and their role. By the end of the first stage the objective was for participants to have a raised critical awareness of the role of news media constructions of the profession in shaping their practice.

The first stage had three sections: introduction, critical reflection journal and preparing for the next session. Each session concluded with a space for debriefing, further questions and queries.

**Stage 1.1: Introduction**

Social workers were recruited as described earlier and introduced to the research topic and process. The focus was on providing a clear understanding of the overall aims of the research, their role, consent, and underlying theory, and answering any questions they may have. There was also an exploration of their beliefs and assumptions about news media coverage before taking part in the research. This was all done through an introductory in
person interview, phone conversation or email discussion, depending on the availability of the participant.

**Stage 1.2: Critical reflection journal**

Research participants were provided with the research pack which included the participant information and consent form and the reflection journal with the guiding question:

- What is the relationship between news media portrayals of social work and your social work practice?

Social workers were given a three-month period to reflect on their practice in attempting to answer this question and document their insights, thoughts, understandings and practice examples. The journal did not have to be submitted but the contents served as the prompt for discussions during the second stage.

**Stage 1.3: Planning for the next session**

Participants were contacted via email to confirm the interview, at which stage an opportunity was provided for questions, queries and debrief.

**Stage 2: Interviews (Construction/Deconstruction)**

Using semi-structured interviews, the second stage continued the critical reflection process and began actively deconstructing the role of news media on practice. The semi-structured interviews of the critical reflection process partially focused on workers describing their practice, profession and context in examining the research topic through two open questions: What is social work in contemporary Melbourne, Australia? and What is the relationship between news media representations of social work and your social work practice? Discussion was based around two main points: defining social work; and exploring how news media constructions of the profession shape practice.

The interviews were conducted in person (n = 16), at RMIT University or the participants’
workplace, and over the phone (n = 4). The interviews were divided into three main sections: discussion, critical reflection and planning for the next session.

**Stage 2.1: Discussion**

Building upon workers’ insights from the past three months, one-hour semi-structured interviews were then conducted with each of the twenty participants exploring two key questions:

- What is social work in contemporary Melbourne, Australia?
- What is the relationship between news media representations of social work and your social work practice?

Follow-up probing and critical reflection questions during the interviews explored the implicit assumptions and issues of recognition and self-worth identified in their accounts. Some examples include:

- What are some of the main observations and insights that you gained from the critical reflection process so far?
- Are there any differences between what you thought before and what you think now?
- What are some of the core assumptions?
- How do these assumptions influenced you?
- How do news media portrayals affect your sense of professional self-confidence/worth?

The interviews were audio recorded and notes were taken by the researcher throughout the process.

**Stage 2.2: Critical reflection journal**

At the conclusion of the interview social workers were given three further journal questions to reflect upon in the following months, providing practice examples where possible, that were also the focus of the first part of the focus group:
• How is social work constructed in the news media?
• How do news media constructions of social work affect you personally?
• How do news media constructions of social work affect you professionally?

**Stage 2.3: Planning for the next session**

The workshop format was discussed and an opportunity for debrief was provided.

**Stage 3: Workshops (Deconstruction/Reconstruction)**

As Fook & Gardner (2007) write, the aim of the final stage is to move from analysis towards exploring new approaches to theory and practice. Following on from the discussions of the past two stages the objective was to identify, through group work, how news media constructions of social work affect social workers, and with these insights identify new understandings and new approaches to theory and practice (Fook & Gardner 2007). Three three-hour workshops were run with approximately four to five participants in each. For those who couldn’t attend, follow-up phone interviews were conducted asking the same questions. This included sharing the main insights from the workshops and participants were provided with an overview of the media analysis prior to discussion.

The workshops were divided into four main parts: journal questions, discussion of research findings, reconstructing practice and final discussion.

The workshops were audio recorded and notes were taken by the researcher throughout the process.

**Stage 3.1: Journal questions**

In small groups, social workers discussed the findings from the critical reflection journal questions (see below). Findings were shared with the larger group.

• How is social work constructed in the news media?
• How do news media constructions of social work affect you personally?
• How do news media constructions of social work affect you professionally?

Stage 3.2: Discussion of research findings

During this stage, the findings of the media analysis portion (see Chapter 5) of the research were presented to participants analysing how social work is constructed in the news media. The findings were put forward for whole group discussion and compared to participants’ analysis of the media as part of the reflection process, not as a way of testing the validity of the findings but as a way of understanding the phenomena more comprehensively.

The following questions guided the discussion:

• What are your thoughts on the findings?
• How are they similar or different from your observations?

Stage 3.3: Reconstructing practice

In small groups, social workers discussed and documented the following questions:

• What new insights have you gained, if any, and how can this be incorporated into your practice?
• What broader-level professional recommendations do you think should come from this research?

The small group discussion was not documented but groups shared their findings in the final whole group discussion.

Stage 3.4: Final discussion

The final section involved a whole group discussion looking at their redeveloped approaches to practice and professional recommendations. The final discussions explored how they have experienced the critical reflection and provided feedback to the researcher.

This session concluded with an opportunity for debrief, further questions and queries.
Methods for analysing data (aim a.)

The interviews and whole group workshop discussions were audio recorded and partially transcribed. The transcription process was influenced by the work of Poland (2002) and King & Horrocks (2010) on the methods and methodological implications of interview transcription. King & Horrocks (2010) argue that whether research implements full or partial transcription depends on the methodologies used and the form of analysis that is required. The authors write that while full transcription is fundamental in certain approaches (for example, conversation analysis), if the aim is to find patterns of common themes across a large number of participants (identified as twenty or more interviews, p. 143), full transcription is not necessary. Partial transcription was conducted by identifying key sections of a recording and transcribing the necessary amount to draw out the main themes and examples.

_NVivo 10 Software_ was used to transcribe, and through the use of thematic analysis (King & Horrocks 2010), code the audio recordings. _NVivo_ software’s capabilities were particularly useful for the identification of key themes in a highly visual and interactive manner. This proved effective in developing links between participants’ statements and having a far more immersive experience with the audio recordings, as opposed to simply reading what they said in written transcripts.

**Thematic analysis**

The raw data, which included interview/group discussion audio recordings and transcripts, documentation of the main points from the small group discussions and submitted critical reflection journals and researcher notes, were coded using thematic analysis as proposed and developed by King & Horrocks (2010), Guest, Macqueen & Namey (2012) and Ezzy (2002) in their research. The approach is similar to Grounded Theory in that it is iterative, content-driven, and searches for themes within textual data. Ezzy (2002) argues that as a qualitative approach, coding in thematic analysis is understood as a method for identifying the themes or concepts in the data. Ezzy (2002) identifies thematic analysis as the early stages of analysis in Grounded Theory (Boyatzis 1998; Ezzy 2002), although it implies a far more methodical approach to data collection and theory development that needs to be
conducted concurrently with data analysis (Strauss & Corbin 1990). Green (1998) argues that several published research articles claim to use Grounded Theory when in fact they have not followed the methodology and utilised thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is deemed a more straightforward yet by no means less rigorous approach to research where, in contrast to Grounded Theory, analysis is conducted on data that has already been entirely collected (Ezzy 2002). Applied thematic analysis was deemed a suitable method for analysing the main themes present throughout the critical reflection process.

Thematic analysis aligns itself to the inductive approach, as the themes and coding schedules were not decided prior to coding the data. King & Horrocks (2010) identify three stages of coding during thematic analysis: descriptive coding, interpretive coding and coding for overarching themes. Figure 4 (see p. 116) details the stages of analysis that were applied to the data generated through the critical reflection.

As D’Cruz & Jones (2004, p. 150) argue, ‘Qualitative data analysis is not a separate stage that comes after the data generation process.’ Rather it is seen as an ongoing process that ought to be a feature of data generation as well as a stage that follows it. The focus was on analysis in the field as a way of being ‘constantly engaged in preliminary analytic strategies’ (Bryman & Burgess 1994, p. 7). Therefore, descriptive coding was conducted in the field after the interviews and workshops and all three stages were carried out at the conclusion of the critical reflection process. The main topics for discussion in each session frame the coding process in exploring the relevant themes present in the data.
ii. Research aim b.

Research aims: b. To document and analyse how social work is constructed in the Melbourne print and online news media over a twelve-month period (Analysis of macro objectivated discourses)

Methodology: Discourse analysis

Research sites: News media and practising social workers

Methods for generating data: Researcher and participant news media analysis (Content analysis)

Methods for analysing data: Research instrument

This section of the research explored the dominant constructions of social work in the news media. Discourse analysis as a methodology (Ainsworth 2001; Phillips & Hardy 2002; Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2008), with its focus on the constructive effects of macro discourses, presented a viable methodological approach that was consistent with the core ontological and epistemological assumptions of the research. In studying the macro-objectivated dimensions, discourse analysis provided a methodological basis that extended the social constructionist underpinnings towards an approach to research. In line with the research
question and underlying theory, the objective was to examine the macro realm of social
construction by understanding the dominant news media constructions of social work,
which were then presented during the reflection workshops and compared to participants
own observations during the reflection period.

Phillips & Hardy (2002) argue that what makes a research technique discursive is not the
method itself but the use of that method to carry out an interpretive analysis of some form
of text with a view to providing an understanding of discourse and its role in constituting
social reality. Phillips & Hardy (2002) and Ainsworth (2001) believe that each topic of study
requires a substantially different approach to discourse analysis; therefore, there is never a
delimited path when choosing methods. Phillips & Hardy (2002) emphasise the high degree
of creativity that is needed in developing methods to explore the discursive phenomena.
Discourses are not neatly packaged in a particular text or even in clusters of texts (Phillips &
Hardy 2002; Ainsworth 2001). Researchers can only trace clues to them regardless of how
much data they collect. The relation between discourse and social reality requires
researchers to study individual texts for clues to the nature of the discourse because
discourses can never be found in their entirety; we must, therefore, examine selections of
the texts that embody and produce them (Parker 1992).

This section will detail the methods used in generating and analysing the data in researching
how social work is discursively constructed in the news media.

Methods for generating data (aim b.)

Content analysis

As previously written, using the Factiva database and News Ltd and Fairfax archives for print
and online news, content analysis was used to search for news stories mentioning the words
‘social work’ and/or ‘social worker/s’ over the twelve-month period between 1 February
2013 and 31 January 2014. The analysis identified 626 print and online newspaper articles,
of which 459 were deemed relevant. Furthermore, as part of the reflection process,
participants analysed the media coverage during the same period and shared their
observations during the workshops.
Methods for analysing data (aim b.)

Development of research instrument

In order to understand how social work is constructed in the news media, twelve definitional categories were developed into a research instrument, with each section exploring a defining attribute and characteristic of the profession. This section of the research draws upon and further develops the work of two prior PhD theses examining the social construction of homelessness (Zufferey 2007) and children (White 2008) in Australian print media from a social work research, critical and social constructionist perspective. Both theses used content and thematic analysis as a method to study discursive constructions of their research topic.

Content and thematic analyses (Berg 2001; Boyatzis 1998; Wilkinson 2004) are the two key methods used in developing the research instrument. The content analysis of the print and online news media stories involved examining what Berg (2001) identifies as both the surface structure or the manifest content (words, statements and concepts that were physically present and countable) and the deep structural meaning conveyed by the message or the latent content, which includes an analysis of what was invisible in the text. Although content analysis has been identified as primarily a quantitative method, Wilkinson (2004) proposes that it looks for recurrent instances of some kind and therefore this could be both quantitative or qualitative depending on how the researcher defines the unit of analysis, whether it be a single word or larger themes. Content analysis is also a widely used technique in media-framing constructionist research (Berger 2000; Chermak 1997) that White (2008) argues focuses on one of the less quantifiable aspects of news context (Entman 1991). Ahuvia (2001, p. 161) proposes that ‘previously one might have seen content analysis as a method for counting content. I am proposing that we view content analysis as a method for counting interpretations of content’. Wilkinson (2003), Berg (2001), White (2008) and Ahuvia’s (2001) approach to content analysis formed the basis of the research instrument.
The research instrument

As was used by White (2008) in her thesis, the primary research instrument was an electronic database used to code and analyse the news media data using content and thematic analysis. The database categories were guided by four research sub-questions:

1. Who are social workers?
2. What areas of practice and populations do social workers work with?
3. What is the social function of social work?
4. What language and discourses are used to construct social work?

The approach to content and thematic analysis that forms the basis of the research instrument was informed by Roger Fowler’s (Fowler 1991) model of critical linguistics. As a methodology and method, critical linguistics explores the details of linguistic structure in relation to the social and historical situation in which the text was produced. According to Fowler, in his text *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press*, ‘critical linguists seek to display to consciousness the patterns of belief and value which are encoded in the language and which are below the threshold of notice for anyone who accepts the discourse as natural’ (1991, p. 67). This approach has been used by a number of critical media researchers in their studies (Aldridge 2003; Allan 1999; Goddard & Saunders 2001; White 2008).

The news media stories were initially coded quantitatively for standard descriptive properties. For the news media text, this included date, headline, news source, author and genre.

Pilot testing

The database was developed using an unfolding and iterative approach to research design, as proposed by Punch (2000), with the initial categories as the basis for the data collection that changed during the process. Poindexter and McCombs (1999) argue that pretesting is fundamental in determining the reliability of coding decisions. The database was pilot tested with a small sample of news stories separately by the two principal researchers to test the
reliability of the categories. Minor changes to the category names were made after this process.

The research instrument structure

Using the IBM SPSS Statistics 22 software package, the research database was developed using the categories listed in Table 6. The number of variables for each category was determined inductively as the research progressed and will be detailed in the findings section.

After the data was coded (using qualitative analysis and the IBM SPSS Statistics 22 software), recurrent instances and frequency of themes and content were analysed to explore the dominant constructions of the profession in each site. As discourses are understood to be in constant struggle with each other, as one interpretation of reality seeks dominance (Holstein & Gubrium 2008), the aim was to identify the main constructions vying for supremacy. As Sterk & Knoppers (2009) and Wodak & Krzyzanowski (2008) argue, discourses become dominant through repetition, and as certain groups benefit from them, therefore analysing the data for recurrent constructions was deemed epistemologically suitable for researching dominant discourses.

Table 6: Categories for the database

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fields of practice</td>
<td>Content analysis (Berg 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client populations</td>
<td>Content analysis (Berg 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social issues</td>
<td>Content analysis (Berg 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker gender</td>
<td>Content analysis (Berg 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker age</td>
<td>Content analysis (Berg 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker qualifications</td>
<td>Content analysis (Berg 2001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work methods</td>
<td>Thematic analysis (Wilkinson 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social function of social work</td>
<td>Thematic analysis (Wilkinson 2003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News source analysis</td>
<td>News source analysis (Hall 1978)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypes used</td>
<td>Thematic analysis (Fowler 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Descriptors</td>
<td>Critical language analysis (Fowler 1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interdiscursivity</td>
<td>Discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thematic analysis of media findings

Through the use of the research instrument, the analysis of recurrent themes and constructions presented dominant constructions of the profession in the news media (Sterk & Knoppers 2009; Aitken 2001; Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2008). The findings were presented during the workshops and compared to participants’ own observations during the reflection period. The media analysis, participants’ observations and workshop discussions were then analysed using King & Horrocks (2010) three-stage thematic analysis to identify the major themes in the data. The findings will be presented in Part Two of this thesis.

iii. Research aim c.

Research aims: c. Together with social workers’ reflections and understandings, develop new theoretical insights into the role of news media in the social construction of social work professional identity

Methodology: Critical reflection and discourse analysis
Research sites: Research data
Method: Alvesson & Karreman’s (2011) stages of qualitative theory development

Stages of qualitative theory development

In line with the constructionist underpinnings, this study aimed to not only present new understandings on the relationship between social work and the news media but to also provide a theoretical contribution. In order to do this, this section used a combined methodological approach that draws from critical reflection (with the theory development work seen as a continuation of the reconstruction stage) and discourse analysis (with a specific focus on discourse and subject positioning).

As Alvesson & Karreman (2007, 2011) argue, theory development, while seen as one of the more valuable and prestigious elements of social sciences, is also absent from a lot of work due to its inherent difficulty. The authors attempt to overcome this perceived shortcoming by developing a method for theory development from qualitative empirical material, building on Asplund (1970), Poole & Van de Ven (1989) and Abbott’s (2004) work. Their
approach utilises aspects of social constructionist thought, critical reflection and discourse analysis seeking to ‘enhance our ability to challenge, refute, refine and illustrate theory’ (Alvesson & Karreman 2011, p. 14). As constructionist researchers, Alvesson & Karreman (2007, 2011) framework focuses on identity formation, discourse and meaning-making processes. Their approach to theory development stems from five stages as shown in Table 7 that include: familiarisation, enacting a breakdown, elevating the breakdown into a mystery, solving the mystery and developing a resolution. The use of Alvesson & Karreman’s (2011) framework assisted in the development of theory by focusing initially on the inconsistencies (or ‘breakdowns’) in meaning that may have been present in the reflection process data.

Broadly, the main goal of the framework is to identify in empirical material ‘breakdowns’ in meaning that may be of theoretical interest, elevate them to the status of mystery to be resolved through existing theory, and if the theory is not present then this creates a clear opportunity for theory development that may then be applicable to the broader scholarship on the topic. The stages are not meant to be used in strict order, but serve as a general structure from which to explore the data (Alvesson & Karreman 2007; 2011).

Table 7: The five stages of theory development (Alvesson & Karreman 2007, pp. 67–73)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Familiarisation</td>
<td>Familiarisation with the setting under study and making inquiries about themes in a fairly open way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Enacting a breakdown</td>
<td>Encountering/constructing breakdowns in understanding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Elevating the breakdown into a mystery</td>
<td>If existing theory does not explain the breakdown, moving it from breakdown to mystery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Solving the mystery</td>
<td>Solving or reformulating the mystery through the development of a new idea that offers a new interpretation of the phenomenon that inspired the mystery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Developing a resolution</td>
<td>Developing the (re)solution of the mystery so that it gains a broader relevance for a specific terrain and this positions it more clearly in relationship to other theories</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Alvesson & Karreman’s (2007, 2009, 2011) work aligned itself strongly to the constructionist underpinnings as the focus is on the situated and co-constructed nature of empirical material. The authors challenge the traditional understanding of the theory-data relationship and propose new reflexive frameworks to explore the creative, political and philosophical elements of data production. Adopting a constructionist viewpoint, their approach encourages researchers to think critically about the research and the knowledge creation process as one that is novel and creative.

The findings from this analysis highlighted the relationship between social workers’ professional identity and dominant assumptions about the news media, which will be explored in Part Three of this thesis.

4.6 Research limitations

The research is in line with all other research on this topic in focusing primarily on the text used in media reporting and not focusing greatly on accompanying images. While a limitation, existing research prioritises understanding the text used as an effective way of discerning dominant discourses (Phillips & Hardy 2002; Putnam & Fairhurst 2001; Wodak & Krzyzanowski 2008). Furthermore, the research focused on print and online, but not television and radio news content due to the technological search limitations. Informit TVNews is an expansive database that searches Australian audio-visual news content through key search terms but not full transcripts. This would mean that a news story would have to have been identified as being about social work by Informit for it to appear as a search item result, of which there were not many (n = 4). Analysing twelve months of television and radio broadcasts was not deemed feasible given the arduous work of having to watch and listen to potentially hundreds of hours of content, and therefore the focus was on print and online. The significance of print and online news media is supported by Chomsky’s theory (Chomsky & Herman 2004; Nabi & Oliver 2009; Takeshita 2006) regarding the ideological dominance of print media.

The impact of news media constructions of the profession on clients, co-workers and other relevant stakeholders will be explored in relation to practice from the social workers’ perspective. Payne (2005) argues that the literature tends to ignore clients’ influences in the
social construction of social work. This research acknowledges the role that clients play but
the focus is exclusively on social workers and practice in order to explore the topic with the
necessary depth of inquiry and analysis. Critical reflection has been used extensively for
workers to deconstruct not just their own thoughts, actions and context but also that of
clients and co-workers they come in contact with, and how this impacts practice. Exploring
clients’ experiences of news media coverage provides an opportunity for future research
that could valuably complement this study.

This research contributes to social work professional knowledge in its exploration of the
relationship between news media portrayals of the profession and social work. The research
does not attempt to provide a universal truth regarding news media and social work. The
intent is not to provide findings that are fully generalisable to every social worker but rather
present research that is of transferrable value and may encourage practitioners to reflect
upon their own practice. While from a constructionist perspective this is a valid research
aim, if understood from a modernist scientific approach the findings could be criticised for
being purely subjective interpretations, not meeting the standards of validity and reliability
deemed necessary within this paradigm. However, within a constructionist understanding,
all research is in some respects a product of the social, political and cultural environment in
which it was produced (D’Cruz & Jones 2004). The rigour and trustworthiness of the
research is assured through the appropriation of methods and strategies commensurate
with the constructionist underpinnings: including reflexivity, triangulation and member
checking (Rubin & Babbie 2010).

4.7 Conclusion

Chapter 4 has detailed the research design of this study, including an exploration of the
strategy, question, aims, methodology, methods, sites and limitations. This chapter has
presented the multidimensional research design of this thesis, informed by a mixed
methodological approach and several modes of analysis. In order to answer the research
question, the research design was comprised of three interconnected sections, driven by
the three main aims including: exploring how news media portrayals of social work affect
social workers at a personal and professional level; analysing how social work is discursively
constructed in the Melbourne print and online news media over a twelve-month period;
and developing new theoretical insights into the role of the news media in the social construction of the social work. In order to achieve these aims, this chapter has presented the complex, systemic and integrated approach in which the relationship between social work and the news media was researched. The design is consistent with the underlying social constructionist theoretical underpinnings and the lacunae in knowledge identified in the review of the literature.

The next and final section of Part One will reflexively explore my role in the research formulation and development process.
Part One: Reflexive analysis – Motivations and adopting a new identity

As written previously, Harding (1991, p. 140) argues that the scientific method represents ‘weak objectivity’ because it does not take into account its own social and historical context and therefore ‘strong objectivity’ is achieved primarily through ‘strong reflexivity’. In order to achieve this, I continually reflected on my role, changes in assumptions and my professional identity throughout the research process. This included reflecting on how my own practice experience and newly acquired role as a social work academic affected the relationship with participants, and how my own sense of identity shifted throughout the process. During the research period I maintained an electronic journal documenting key ideas and dilemmas, and these served as prompts for reflection and discussion with my supervisors. The aim of these sections is to draw from the journal and discussions to reflexively and reflectively explore my role and sense of identity in the formulation and development of the research (Behrens 2007). The reflexive component of this thesis will not be written about in a single section of this document but will be explored contextually at the conclusion of each part and in relation to the different research stages.

The main source of reflection in the early stages of this research was a deeper exploration of my motivation behind researching this area of knowledge. As a social worker with an interest in the media, and having worked for Fairfax as a writer, I have been interested in the media’s portrayal of the profession for the majority of my professional life. So much so, that in the second year of my bachelor of social work degree, I completed a minor research project on the topic (Cordoba 2008). It was only when I started practising that I became interested in the relationship between the media and practice.

It was shortly after graduating that I began working as a social worker in an Australian paediatric hospital. During one instance the medical staff referred a family for emotional support after a horrific motor vehicle accident. On meeting the family, I introduced myself as a social worker and as usual clarified my role. It was upon uttering the words ‘social worker’ that I immediately noticed the family’s increased anxiety and apprehension. After building trust, the family disclosed that this was due to their initial assumption that I was
there in a child protection capacity, and this was coming from a family where there were no protective concerns and who had no prior protective services experience. As a new worker I reflected on my practice and was confronted by the idea that although I was there to provide support, my very presence was making a difficult situation worse, and only by stating my professional title. This made me want to better comprehend how individuals, families and groups know about the profession, and in particular, the role of the news media.

As a student I became aware of the dominant idea that the profession was ‘under attack’ by the media through lectures, readings, classroom discussions and informal conversations. I had always assumed this was the case and drew upon practice examples like the one previously mentioned to solidify these claims, without any greater level of reflection. I had formed my professional identity around the assumption that social work was a force for good, whose humanitarian mission was being impeded by the neoliberal interests of some news media owners. This was a belief I held strongly until I began to undertake the media analysis component of the research. A preliminary review of the literature identified that I was not alone in my interest, but there seemed to be a lack of thorough research on the topic. My positioning as a Caucasian, able-bodied and tertiary educated male allowed me the privilege, both financially and time wise, to further these ideas and developed them into a thesis proposal that led me to being accepted in the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) program at RMIT University.

The development of the research design was the result of several months of reading and discussion with my supervisors. The social phenomenon was viewed through a constructionist, critical and post-modern framework, as these were the paradigms that informed the majority of my previous education. As is evident through the use of authors and references, the conception of this research drew initially from the social work literature I was exposed to during my undergraduate degree, which draws primarily from the constructionist and critical tradition (Allan et al. 2009; Fook 2002; Pease & Fook 1999). Although the design was completed during the first year of candidature, it has been refined over the past few years with the alternating use of theories to inform the epistemological foundations.
I documented the initial struggles I experienced in maintaining the dual identity of becoming both an academic and a practitioner, as I continued with practice until the final months of the candidature. As I shifted between these two positions, I began to appreciate the internal division between those who practice and those who research. This included certain levels of respective animosity regarding the knowledge and experience base of each group in determining what constitutes ‘real’ social work. Entering into the academic arena also led to the deconstruction of my professional ideals (represented by the respective domain in Figure 3 p. 45) as I started this thesis with the intent of advocating on behalf of the profession from broadly an anti-oppressive perspective. Becoming familiar with the literature and the continued development of my academic and research abilities was paralleled with a decrease in this uncritical acceptance of professional goals that highlighted the fragmented, ambiguous and contested nature of the professional identity.

Ultimately this led to a deeper appreciation of the complexity of the social work identity and its relationship to the news media, which also broadened my scope of inquiry. The continued shifts in my professional identity and my role in the knowledge creation process (focusing on the reflection stages and the challenging of my own assumptions) will be explored at the conclusion of Part Two of the thesis.
Part One: Conclusion

Part One presented the theoretical approach, review of the literature and the research design that formed the foundations of this study. This was done by initially establishing the constructionist theoretical underpinnings, framing the core concepts and identifying the significant gaps in knowledge, including the existence of a dominant and taken-for-granted assumption regarding coverage and its impacts. Then it demonstrated how a constructionist paradigm was used to develop a research study that consisted of a mixed method, critical reflection process with twenty practising social workers (involving journals, interviews and group work), a discourse analytic approach (exploring social work news media coverage) and a theory development process.

Part Two of this thesis will now explore the main insights from the critical reflection process and media analysis, as identified through the thematic analysis of the journal, interview, workshop and media analysis data. The arguments proposed in the next section of the thesis serve as an alternative, situated and co-constructed narrative regarding how the news media portrays the profession and its impacts on workers.
Part Two:
News media analysis and critical reflection process – findings and discussion
Part Two: Introduction

The research project that informs this thesis set out to better understand how the news media portrays the profession, and how this affects workers at a professional and personal level. This was initially done through a collaborative, twelve-month, critical reflection and media analysis project with twenty practising social workers (see Figure 5). In line with the theoretical approach, the goal was not to develop a grand theory about the topic, but instead to offer a more thorough and rigorous analysis to help inform and foster discussion (Alvesson & Karreman 2011). The process resulted in numerous insights in relation to a broad range of areas that will be detailed in this part of the thesis. The majority of the findings were underpinned by the surprising discovery for participants that coverage was not critical, but rather mostly absent, and with the limited reporting being more diverse and positive than assumed. This challenged not only their assumptions, but also the relevance of the dominant beliefs about coverage within the professional community.

Figure 5: Research project timeline

Part Two consists of four chapters. Each chapter focuses on one of the overarching themes identified through the thematic analysis (King & Horrocks 2010) of the journal, interviews, workshops and media analysis data including: Theme 1 – The news media’s coverage of the profession (Chapter 5); Theme 2 – The impacts on practice (Chapter 6); Theme 3 – The effects on identity, self-confidence and worth (Chapter 7); and Theme 4 – Participants’ reconstructed knowledge and approaches to practice (Chapter 8).

Part Two will begin by presenting the findings from the researcher and participant news media analysis looking at the dominant discursive constructions of social work. This will also include what participants reported to be the broader explanatory issues regarding the lack
of reporting, including newsworthy criteria and the deprofessionalisation of social work. The
analysis will then focus at an interpersonal level on how participants identified that the
news media impacts direct practice, clients, co-workers and their organisational contexts.
Furthermore, it will explore the intrapersonal impacts by looking at how reporting affected
participants’ sense of identity, self-confidence and self-worth. Lastly, it will present the
reconstructed knowledge and approaches to practice that resulted from the process,
including the identification by participants of new opportunities for action. Part Two will
conclude with the continuing reflexive analysis of my identity, positioning and role within
the research process.

As a common approach within qualitative studies, in this section the findings and discussion
are integrated (Holloway & Brown 2012; Flick 2013). The findings that resulted from the
process are understood to be a co-constructed narrative between the interviewer and
interviewee/s (Silverman 2011). The knowledge that was created and is explored in this
section is acknowledged to be the result of a situated encounter whose academic value is its
transferability not its generalisability. It is also important to note that although participants
are identified as co-researchers throughout, in line with the constructionist underpinnings
of this study the arguments and findings offered here are ultimately those of the researcher,
as it is my analysis and interpretation of the data that will be presented.

In relation to the central argument, Part Two will focus primarily on how participants
understood social work in relation to the news media. Part Three will then focus on how the
positioning identified in this part was in stark contrast to how participants understood social
work when attempting to define it in the earlier stages of the interviews. It is this
contradiction that will be argued to represent significant shifts in the subject positioning
from a conflicted, contradictory and contested understanding of the profession when it was
discussed in general, to a morally clear, more unified and stable one when discussed in the
context of news coverage.
Chapter 5: Theme 1 – Social work in the news media

5.1 Introduction: Researcher and participant media analysis

The purpose of the media analysis was to document and analyse how social work is discursively constructed in the Melbourne print and online news media. The analysis was researcher-led and drew upon the contribution of the twenty participants as co-researchers who, as part of the reflection process, were also looking at how the news media portrays the profession, but in a less structured manner.

This chapter discusses the media analysis component of the research, which looked at a total of 626 print and online newspaper articles (of which 459 were deemed relevant) over a twelve-month period (02/2013 to 01/2014) that mentioned the terms ‘social work’, ‘social worker’ or ‘social workers’. The researcher-led analysis looked at the four most accessed news sources in the Melbourne context (print and online), which included The Age & websites, Herald Sun & websites, The Australian & websites and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation News (ABC News) website. Using the research instrument, the news articles were coded and analysed according to twelve definitional categories, with each section exploring a defining attribute and characteristic of the profession. The instrument was used to identify recurrent instances and frequency of content in order to determine the dominant constructions of the profession. The media analysis findings were presented during the critical reflection workshops and compared to participants’ own observations of the news media during the same period.

The media analysis findings, participants’ observations of coverage during the reflection process and the workshop discussions were then analysed using thematic analysis (King & Horrocks 2010), and this led to the identification of four sub-themes in relation to the profession’s media coverage: Sub-theme 1.1 – Social work’s relative absence from the news media, Sub-theme 1.2 – Social work practice was constructed as diverse and wide-ranging, Sub-theme 1.3 – The variety of social worker demographics, and Sub-theme 1.4 – The use of care/control discourses in reporting. Before starting the critical reflection process, the majority of participants had a firm belief that coverage would be unfairly critical and as early
as the reflection journal several believed this not to be the case. The absence of coverage became a significant discovery early on in the process, as it did not reflect the dominant assumptions present in much of the literature (Galilee 2005; Mendes 2001a).

This chapter will begin by presenting the findings from the media analysis by drawing upon the data from the research instrument categories (identifying dominant discursive constructions of the profession in the news media according to key characteristics), and the interview and workshop transcripts. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the main explanatory arguments as proposed by participants in exploring why social work is mainly absent from the news media, which included newsworthy criteria, the deprofessionalisation of social work and the public relations failures of the AASW.

5.2 Sub-theme 1.1: Social work and its relative absence from the news media

The analysis identified that social work was relatively absent from the news media at three levels: the amount of reporting when compared to similar professions, the lack of social workers contributing to public debate, and the lack of detail in a considerable amount of social work related news content.

The first section of the news media analysis used the news database Factiva to compare how much print media coverage social work received in comparison to similar professions over the period of analysis (02/2013 to 01/2014). The literature review identified that concern over the relationship between the media and practice was shared by most of the caring professions, with social work being singled out by its own trade-press for its particularly harsh coverage (Franklin & Parton 1991). Due to database and technological limitations, it was not possible to include online articles in the comparison, but the majority of stories in this study were in print format and were rarely exclusively online. Furthermore, in the initial comparative analysis the aim was to contrast the amount of coverage quantitatively and not qualitatively, as comparing how the other professions were portrayed was beyond the scope of this study which focuses exclusively on social work.

As evidenced in Table 8 (p. 135), social work received almost half as much coverage as the next comparable profession, psychiatry. In contrast to the professions with which
participants identified as equivalents (mainly psychologists, teachers and nurses), social work received significantly less coverage. Only chaplains and youth workers, whose professional status has received even greater scrutiny given the lack of formal qualifications required to practice (Coussée et al. 2012), received less coverage than social work. Although this may be due to the fact that social workers are frequently identified by their job roles, for example, case managers or caseworkers instead of their profession (Healy 2005), it is evidence that during the period of analysis, social work as a profession was comparatively absent. Although the low professional status of social work has been written about extensively, the literature argues that this is leading to negative coverage and not necessarily its absence (Franklin & Parton 1991; Galilee 2005). The lack of coverage and its significance, identified even in the earliest stages of analysis, will become a recurrent theme throughout Part Two.

Table 8: Comparative analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>Search terms (Print Only)</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth worker</td>
<td>Youth work OR Youth worker OR Youth workers</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chaplain</td>
<td>Chaplaincy OR Chaplain OR Chaplains</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>Social work OR Social worker OR Social workers</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychiatrist</td>
<td>Psychiatry OR Psychiatrist OR Psychiatrists</td>
<td>709</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Psychology OR Psychologist OR Psychologists</td>
<td>1816</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Teacher OR Teachers</td>
<td>3443</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurse</td>
<td>Nurse OR Nurses OR Nursing</td>
<td>3708</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>Doctor OR Doctors</td>
<td>8647</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The initial analysis presented a profession that seemed comparatively absent from the public sphere. The findings from the first stage of the media analysis also reflected participants’ own insights:

Social workers are misrepresented in the media mainly because we are not represented at all. In examples where social work should have the loudest voice we have no voice. When I first started this research I was wondering whether I would find negative representations, but what I found is just a lack of representation of social work and I think that that is more detrimental because clients and other workers don’t recognise my profession. (Participant 11, Interview)
Participants identified that had they been asked the same questions prior to the reflection process, they would have confidently stated that coverage was unfairly critical and negative. During the workshops, participants observed that the findings from the comparative analysis also mirrored their experience with media reporting. When discussing the absence, we both identified that this was not limited to the lack of coverage, but also extended to the vague and unclear manner in which social workers were reported on. As identified in Table 11: Fields of practice (p. 139), Table 12: Clients (p. 143) and Table 13: Social Issues (p. 145), a considerable amount of coverage did not detail whom social workers practice with and what they do. In coding the news articles for key characteristics, such as fields of practice, clients and forms of intervention, approximately a quarter (on average) of the reporting was identified as ‘non-specific’, meaning that it was not possible to determine within the context of the article. As was discussed during the workshops, this was identified as being problematic given that there was very little coverage. This was countered to some degree by the discovery that despite the lack of clarity the limited amount of reporting tended to be far more diverse and even more positive than assumed.

During the workshop discussion the lack of reporting was exemplified by the absence of social workers contributing to public debate. The focus was very much on the poor engagement from the news media with the profession, and not the need for professionals to be more proactive.

Experts are always drawn upon but not social workers. There are people that are drawn for comment but you don’t get the view of people working with clients. Why is my profession not seen to have an expertise or a value to draw upon in terms of making a comment? Social work is not seen as an area of expertise, social work is seen as a second rate profession... (Participant 7, Interview)

The news source analysis, as shown in Table 9 (p. 137), identified that the majority of news media content relating to social work did not cite social workers. There were numerous examples where the articles were specifically about social work but workers were not sought for comment. This included instances where the reporting was both celebratory (‘Call for farmers to get full-time social worker’, ABC News, 26.02.2013) and critical (‘Beware
self-interest dressed as social conscience’, *The Australian*, 12.02.2013) of social work. Several participants believed that this presented a profession that was not acknowledged to have an opinion or area of expertise worth citing, even when they are the focus of coverage. As shown in Table 9, the media analysis substantiated participants’ claims that social work did not contribute to public debate, at least in relation to social work specific news coverage.

**Table 9: News source analysis - Overview of articles that cite social workers (2013–2014)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News source analysis overview</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No social worker cited</td>
<td>335</td>
<td>72.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker cited</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>27.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 10: News source analysis - Most cited social work sources (2013–2014)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>News source analysis sources</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AASW president Karen Healy</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker Narelle Grech</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker Chris Tanti</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Cathy Humphreys</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Rosamunde Thorpe</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker Jacinta Collins</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker Lisa Hunt Vasquez</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Donna Chung</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Aldridge (1994) writes, journalists depend on a reliable and limited range of sources when reporting and, as social workers are restricted in what they can say due to confidentiality, they do not frequently appear in the media. The limits of confidentiality are highlighted by the fact that the majority of social workers who were cited were academics providing an opinion on general social issues, and not specific cases. There were several (n = 124) examples of social workers who were cited for comment regarding a wide range of issues from child protection (‘Little girl lost’, *theaustralian.com.au*, 02.02.2013), family violence (‘The terror in our homes’, *theage.com.au*, 23.04.2013) to ageing (‘Ageing well’, *theage.com.au*, 05.04.2013). The most cited social worker was academic and AASW national president Karen Healy, who has given greater priority to media engagement than previous presidents (AASW President Statement 2014). Healy’s contribution to public debate, in two news articles and a letter to the editor, was based around advocacy regarding protective practices in Queensland, as evidenced by the article below:
The police union in Queensland wants beefed-up laws to force pregnant women into safe houses to monitor their drinking, drug use and their associates in a bid to protect unborn babies ... Australian Association of Social Workers president Karen Healy said the proposal was ‘concerning’ and could have unintended consequences. ‘It could lead to women not disclosing they are using drugs to medical practitioners’, Ms Healy said. ‘It may actually reduce the capacity of medical professionals to monitor these children.’ She said the number of children in out-of-home care was growing unsustainably and extending it to unborn children should be ‘carefully considered’. (‘Social workers reject police pregnancy push’, The Australian 09.02.2013)

Although it is beyond the scope of this research, participants identified several examples of news stories about parenting issues where a range of professionals were cited, but not social workers. Throughout the media analysis, participants came across news articles relating to human rights, social justice and disadvantage that they believed social workers would have a great deal of experience and expertise to contribute, especially in regard to understanding the issue from a holistic approach. Several spoke of their frustration at seeing doctors and psychologists frequently cited as being the experts on family violence issues, without any acknowledgement of the contribution from social work to the field. The focus was once again on the responsibility of the news media engaging with the profession, and very few references to the need for professionals to be more proactive. Participants, and my analysis, identified that the lack of coverage, clarity and public voice in reporting was evidence of social work’s comparative absence in the news media.

Fifteen participants expressed immense frustration with welfare and youth workers being incorrectly named as social workers. As has been argued, it is very difficult in most instances to determine whether the social worker being reported on is a qualified professional, as individuals who are not qualified are able to use the title. Participants and the news media analysis were able to identify three clear cases where high profile individuals were identified as social workers incorrectly. In almost every interview, participants spoke of their frustration that Les Twentyman, a Melbourne youth worker, is repeatedly portrayed as a social worker even though he is not qualified. Participants shared their anger given that his
approach to community work does not align itself to core ‘social work values’, primarily with
his ‘fear mongering’ and the focus on building his public persona. Two examples were
identified during the period of analysis where Twentyman was reported as being a social
worker: ‘Melton man tells: My living hell on “evil” drugs’, heraldsun.com.au, 07.02.2013 and
‘Hot kids having a ball’, Herald Sun, 19.01.2014.

Another example was Father Bob McGuire and the Reverend Tim Costello who were
referred to as social workers, as shown below. Although it is clear for individuals with a
background in the profession that they are not qualified, once again the general reader may
not make this distinction.

I’m not much of a signer and don’t know if I would bother (it has
attracted some 1700 signatures thus far). But his motives are pure and
his arguments are valid and have been backed by the likes of Melbourne
social workers Father Bob McGuire and the Reverend Tim Costello.

(‘Only an idiot would laugh at the disabled’, Sunday Herald Sun
12.05.2013)

Participants suggested that the erroneous identification of social workers was symptomatic
of the deprofessionalisation that they experience as occurring for the profession.

5.3 Sub-theme 1.2: Social work practice as diverse and wide-ranging

While coverage may have been mostly absent, the limited amount of reporting found in the
analysis was less critical and far more diverse than previously assumed (Mendes 2001a,
2001b; Franklin & Parton 1998; Galilee 2005). This section will draw upon the findings from
the fields, clients, social issues and intervention categories of the research instrument in
exploring the diversity and complexity that was used to construct the profession.
i. Diversity in fields of practice

In analysing the fields of practice, over 20% of the articles did not provide any discernible detail. This was mainly due to the fact that social work was not the sole focus of the article and the term was used to identify the profession of an individual who was being reported on for other reasons. While it was not the majority of coverage, it was significant enough to identify that a substantial part of the scarce reporting on social work did not provide great detail. In exploring the remaining data, as shown in Table 11, social work was constructed as practising within a wide range of fields covering the full range of documented possibilities (Alston & McKinnon 2005).

Table 11: News analysis - Fields of practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fields of practice</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>21.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child protection</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child, youth &amp; family support services</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academia &amp; research</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Correctional &amp; criminal justice</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy &amp; politics</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income maintenance/employment</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aged care</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family &amp; domestic violence</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community work</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘CALD’ support services</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis &amp; disaster</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural &amp; remote communities</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serving military &amp; veterans</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>459</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In exploring the diversity of fields presented, it is important to highlight that international social work received the most coverage. This finding began to challenge the dominant assumption that social work is constructed overwhelmingly within protective services and
mainly in a highly critical light (Franklin & Parton 1991, 2001; Galilee 2005; Mendes 2001a). Although child protection is still the most reported field in the Australian context, health received almost as much coverage and as will be explored, the manner in which protective services were reported was far more diverse than assumed. International social work, for the purpose of this research, was identified as practice that was not occurring in Australia, including community development work (n = 11), crisis intervention in war-torn areas (n = 10) and overseas protection agencies (n = 3). Although international social work received the most coverage, it was difficult to identify whether the individual was qualified by Australian standards and not carrying out a form of charity or community work in a cultural context that does not require formal qualifications. Although mostly favourable, the diversity was not limited to the fields themselves but also to how social workers were represented, from caring and selfless individuals:

One of Karachi’s most prominent social workers, Parveen Rehman, was gunned down last month on her way home from work. The 56-year-old worked on education and sanitation projects in Orangi Town, and battled the land and water mafias that seize land and block water pipes into poor settlements to sell a resource the rest of the city gets free. (‘Taliban shadow on a gangster’s paradise in Pakistan’, *The Australian*, 27.4.2013)

to cold-hearted authoritarians:

The Daily Mail has published a video of the removal which was secretly filmed by J’s father using a webcam on their family computer. In the video, the mother is clearly distraught and holds onto her baby and rocks it as her husband remonstrates with officers and council staff. Distressing video has emerged of social services officers taking a six-hour-old baby from his parents. One social worker can be heard telling the parents: ‘We are going to take [baby J]. I don’t want to have to get physical.’ The mother can be heard wailing and screaming ‘no’ as social workers take her baby. The parents said social workers removed their baby because they decided their mother was incapable of bringing them (sic) up
because of her learning disability. (*Social workers filmed removing six-hour-old baby from his parents*, news.com.au, 6.09.2013)

While the child protection field received numerous mentions, it was almost exactly the same as hospital and health-based social work. Furthermore, in articles relating to Melbourne child protection services, workers were not identified as social workers but rather as ‘protective officers’. This was in contrast to reporting on the Department of Community Services in New South Wales where workers were exclusively identified as being social workers. Regardless, there was greater diversity in terms of how this field is assumed to be portrayed with the majority of the reporting (65%) not vilifying individual workers, as argued in the literature, but rather focused on the stresses of the role and the organisational limitations, as shown below.

These cases (child protection) were usually shut with the note ‘due to competing priorities’, said Robin Croon, an organiser with the Public Service Association of NSW. ‘The system is failing the children of this state’, she said, while stressing case workers were doing their best with limited resources ... Experts said the sheer number of cases was swamping social workers, causing many experienced caseworkers to leave because they had become burnt out and had been traumatised by the cases they had seen. (*The system is failing the children of this state: most child abuse cases closed early, says PSA*, theage.com.au, 26.06.2013)

The research was able to identify seventeen examples of news reporting about child protection that were highly critical of the profession. The stories drew upon the contradictory stereotypes as identified by Franklin & Parton (1991) of being either ‘wimps’ for not acting soon enough or ‘bullies’ for acting too soon and exceeding their power. ‘Bullies’ (n = 6) were constructed as being overzealous workers who were acting beyond the scope of their authority. The authoritarian nature of practice extended to representing social workers as cold-hearted individuals with little regard for the emotional wellbeing of clients. This included examples of social workers’ involvement in the forced adoption practices of the 1960s and 1970s. In these cases, and drawing upon victims own accounts,
as shown in the quote on p. 142, social workers were reported as being falsifiers who knowingly deceived families, mothers and children. Former prime minister Julia Gillard’s apology for forced adoption practices received a great amount of coverage during the period of analysis (‘National Apology for Forced Adoptions, Prime Minister Julia Gillard in Canberra’, news.com.au, 21.03.2013). Although the majority of reporting attributed responsibility (or blame) for the tragedy to a range of professionals, including doctors and nurses, social workers were still the focus of negative coverage:

She says lies by social workers have left her husband in the dark ... ‘He burst out crying’, she said. ‘All his life he was brought up to believe that his parents brought him into the world with love. I want the social worker to apologise to my husband’s family for lying, and being so insensitive.’

(‘Gillard delivers apology to victims of forced adoption’, Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) News, 21.03.2013)

More commonly (n = 11), child protection social workers were constructed as ‘wimps’ for being indecisive in their action, to the detriment of clients. During the twelve-month period, the death of ‘Kiesha’ was the focus of reporting but coverage did not single out social work, concentrating on the larger resourcing problems faced by the sector. Furthermore, and as typified in the quote below, social workers were allotted blame along with several other groups and professions, and not necessarily singled out as the literature suggests.

These were injuries at the hands of her mother that received no medical attention, despite the fact that police, social workers, neighbours, relatives and education and health authorities had all seen the tell-tale signs of abuse. (‘Why little Kiesha had no hope from the start’, Sunday Herald Sun, 21.07.2013)

The dichotomous use of the social care and social control discourses in constructing the social work profession will be explored in greater depth in the next section of this chapter.
ii. **Diversity of clients**

As Table 12 (pp. 144-145) shows, the reporting portrayed social workers as practising with a large and diverse client population. In researching ‘who are social work clients?’ according to the news media, 24% of the articles were non-specific. Children were identified as the most mentioned client group across family support and health fields, both locally and internationally, and not predominantly in a protective context. Women and children, in the context of family violence and abuse, were constructed as the most vulnerable social group. The analysis did not identify a reliance on deserving and undeserving poor discourses to construct the client base, and the majority of reporting presented a clear need and broader responsibility for support and action. Clients were constructed mainly using victim discourses, giving the individuals or group little agency to resolve their struggles.

Furthermore, within issues of family violence, in several instances clients were portrayed as acting against their best interests, despite numerous attempts for support from workers. This would usually focus on questioning the wisdom of mothers who did not flee violent homes, especially when their children were at risk.

In the reporting, social work clients were commonly framed within a highly individualised understanding of social problems. In drawing upon medical discourses of mental health, issues such as depression were portrayed as being the domain of an individual’s illness, with little exploration of larger systemic issues. The major exceptions were rural communities where social workers were constructed as working with individuals, families and communities as a whole. The diversity of the client population identified by this study challenges the main arguments present in much of the literature suggesting that social work is narrowly constructed as working only with children in protective situations.

**Table 12: News analysis - Clients**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clients</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>24.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>19.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young people</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Families</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adults</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People in the criminal justice system</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 12: News analysis – Clients (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clients (cont.)</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural communities</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with mental health issues</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elderly</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospital patients</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General community</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People experiencing disadvantage</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People on income support</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with drug &amp; alcohol issues</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People with disabilities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugees and migrants</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People experiencing life crisis</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTI</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterans</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse victims</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘CALD’ populations</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex workers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>459</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iii. **Diversity of social issues**

Social work was reported within a vast range of social issues, as shown in Table 13 (p. 146). More than the previous categories, this demonstrates the great diversity and complexity of issues and social work practice contexts. The issues ranged from individual problems of mental and physical health to broader social crises and disadvantage. While child abuse was a significant issue (n = 33), mental and general health had equal and greater reporting. Furthermore, the broad idea of disadvantage was central to most coverage. The majority of stories that identified this issue were in regard to individuals or groups (mainly adults) being unable to access services or opportunities due to structural limitations. Social work’s role within these stories was to provide support and advocacy in removing these hurdles. Participants discovered similar complexities and were surprised that coverage was not as narrow or negative as they had assumed.
While not part of the researcher media analysis, during the interviews and workshops participants observed that the profession was not reported in the context of two significant human rights and social justice issues of the study period: marriage equality and asylum seeker policies. Three participants commented during the workshops that despite social workers being active in these two areas, especially Asylum Seeker Resource Centre founder and social worker Kon Karapanagiotidis’ advocacy work, the profession was absent from media reporting and public debate on these topics. Participants argued that while Kon Karapanagiotidis, who is a qualified social worker, frequently contributes to the news media, he was never identified as such. Throughout the workshops it was suggested by three participants that this was a strategic choice due to the lack of professional capital given to the social work degree and, in particular, in his attempt to establish himself as an expert in the field. Participants were disappointed that given the profession’s commitment to social justice and advocacy, they were absent in the public sphere regarding asylum seekers.

Table 13: News analysis - Social issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social issues</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantage</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental health</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child abuse</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health issues</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>7.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate funding &amp; resources</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abuse &amp; violence</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug &amp; alcohol issues</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict &amp; war</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty &amp; financial difficulties</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incarceration</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief &amp; bereavement</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forced adoption</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ageing &amp; geriatric issues</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human rights</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trauma</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inequality &amp; marginalisation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natural disasters</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vulnerable people</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (&lt; 1%)</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>459</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Five participants also expressed frustration regarding the lack of social work coverage related to the *Royal Commission* into *Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*. Due to social work’s history in supporting survivors and victims of abuse, participants expressed a belief that as a profession they have the experience and knowledge necessary to contribute to and better inform discussion on the issue. Participants did not acknowledge the role that social workers have played historically in mishandling allegations of child abuse, or being perpetrators themselves (AAP 2015). How participants understood and constructed the social work profession during this example, and numerous others, will be explored in greater depth in Part Three in relation to the formation of their professional identity.

iv. **Diversity of practice methods**

In regard to how social work practice and interventions were portrayed, one-third of reporting provided little detail as to what social workers do beyond general notions of helping. As before, the reporting that provided some degree of description portrayed the profession as having a diverse range of skills. Of note, the primary practice skill was advocacy, rather than protective practices, as was assumed. As evidenced in Table 14, social workers were constructed as employing a wide range of skills covering the majority that are attributed to the profession within the literature (Lindsay 2013; Walsh 2008). The emphasis given to advocacy suggests that social work was framed around the more political approach of the profession (Allan et al. 2009), rather than the more clinical elements of assessment and therapy.

**Table 14: News analysis -Practice methods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interventions</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional &amp; practical support</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protective intervention</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crisis work</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community work</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case management</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program development</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group work</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 14: News analysis -Practice methods (cont.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interventions (cont.)</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academia</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy &amp; politics</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raising awareness</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resourcing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal assisted therapy</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grief &amp; bereavement counselling</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outreach</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Referral</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinical therapy</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family support</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liaison &amp; consultation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case work</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expert opinion</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial counselling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing support</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>459</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The media analysis of the practice methods did not reflect the dominant idea that social work is constructed around a limited and stereotypical skill set. The media analysis presented social workers as being able to apply a large range of skills from counselling, group work, policy and research. The majority of participants indicated during the workshops that despite the lack of critical and narrow coverage, the fact that social work was absent from the news media continued to be evidence of the lack of understanding and status of the profession.

5.4 Sub-theme 1.3: Variety of social worker demographics

The media analysis also sought to understand the demographics of social workers in the news media coverage. This, in particular, was an attempt to explore the assumption that the mass media in general portrays social workers as predominantly underqualified and a ‘middle aged spinster, presumably of the feeding hot soup to the homeless variety’ (Franklin & Parton 1991, p. 91). As argued previously, while there was limited coverage, it constructed social workers within a range of demographics that did not reflect dominant stereotypes. While participants’ own analysis of the media did not focus on this topic, as
due to feasibility issues their attention was mainly centred on fields and skill sets, they did provide valuable feedback in relation to the qualifications section during the workshops. In order to argue that the demographics used to construct social workers in the news media were more varied than assumed, this section will explore individually the findings from the media analysis on worker gender, age and qualifications.

i. Demographic: Gender

As shown in Table 15, gender was not a significant demographic used in the reporting. Where gender was identified, the majority of social workers were reported as female, possibly supporting the gendered nature of the profession (Dominelli 2002). There was also a considerable amount of reporting on male social workers, which, when presented during the workshops, surprised most participants given that they experienced social work to be a predominantly female profession. The reporting did not identify the hierarchical or managerial positions of the workers in policy or welfare positions, using only the term ‘social worker’, and therefore it was not possible to determine the percentage of male and female workers in senior roles. In academia, fourteen female social workers were identified as professor, in contrast to four males. Furthermore, the prefix ‘senior’ was only used twice (senior lecturer and senior social worker) to describe two female social workers, and not male. From the lack of detail in the findings, it is difficult to ascertain the degree or impacts of a gendered representation of the profession.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>253</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>31.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>13.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Greater analysis on the gendered representation of social workers in the media presents opportunities for future research.
ii. Demographic: Age

As shown in Table 16 (p. 150), the overwhelming majority of reporting did not identify the social workers’ ages and this suggests that it was not a relevant demographic for the journalists. The small amount of coverage that did include it focused predominantly on social workers between the ages of 25–34 and over 65+.

Table 16: News analysis - Social worker age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social worker age</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>424</td>
<td>92.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–34</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65+</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45–54</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55–64</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35–44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–19</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54–54</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>459</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The age was mainly relevant in eulogies that honoured the social worker’s career and achievements:

Dr Helen Rehr was a remarkable woman who made an ardent and unique contribution to the Australian and international field of health and mental-health social work during a career spanning nearly 70 years. Her passion for excellence in practice and in teaching social work led her to develop innovative social work programs and research to show the essential role of social work in delivering quality health care.

(‘Inspirational advocate for social work’s place in hospital care’, theage.com.au, 6/03/2013)

Melbourne social worker Narelle Grech died this week of cancer, aged 30. An advocate for retrospective rights to information about their biological identity, she was denied information about her biological father, Ray Tonna, for whom she searched for 15 years. (‘Donor children must not be forgotten’, Sunday Herald Sun 31/3/2013)
The analysis did not identify any instance in reporting of social workers being critiqued for lacking experience or common sense due to their young age. The balance of both younger and older social workers could suggest that the news media constructions embrace the complexity of the professional workforce by reflecting the wide range.

iii. **Demographic: Education**

In presenting the media analysis findings during the workshops, participants were surprised that when reported, the news media tended to construct social work as a tertiary qualified profession (see Table 17). Throughout the reflection interviews and workshops the perceived lack of formal skills set was argued to be a major point in the struggle for professional recognition and participants proposing that the news media constructs the profession as a job that ‘anyone could do’ (Participant 7, Interview). The media analysis challenged this view and demonstrated that, when relevant, social work was portrayed as a tertiary qualified skill set. While the majority of coverage did not identify the level of qualification, the analysis was unable to find any explicit examples locally where it could be assumed that social work was an unqualified profession. As mentioned previously, international social work is different as it draws upon the more historical understanding of social work as a form of non-professional charity work.

**Table 17: News analysis - Social work qualifications**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social work qualifications</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>82.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor degree</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate degree</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diploma or certificate</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No qualification required</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>459</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In researching the demographics used in the reporting, the media analysis highlighted their variety and diversity. Furthermore, the findings did not reflect the dominant assumption in the literature that social work is narrowly stereotyped towards a single demographic.
### 5.5 Sub-theme 1.4: Social care and social control in social work coverage

The final sub-theme in the analysis was the use of dichotomous discourses to construct the profession between social work as social control versus social care. As written previously, these concepts represent the twin and contested logics of social work practice and the two are identified as being intertwined and interrelated (Fook 2002; Sheppard 2006). The relationship between the care and control elements of the profession has been debated and written about extensively in the literature and in relation to the news media (Franklin & Parton 1991). In exploring how the news media constructed the social function of the profession, and its use of stereotypes and descriptors, the analysis found that reporting tended to rely upon these larger and dichotomous discourses. Constructing social work as either one of these binary positions relied in some instances on the use of stereotypes, in particular around the ineffectual (wimps) or dictatorial (bullies) ability of workers written about previously. This argument was presented to participants during the workshops at an early and not as developed stage of the analysis and therefore was not a central point for discussion.

#### i. Social work as social care

News media reporting on social work that constructed the profession around discourses of social care championed the ability of the profession to provide support for individuals and the general community. In articles such as: ‘Social workers reject police pregnancy push, *The Australian* 9/12/13; ‘Call for farmers to get full-time social worker’, *abc.net.au* 26/02/2013; ‘Social workers want checks on elderly neighbours home alone’, *news.com.au* 23/06/2013; ‘Social workers push to extend support for youths in foster care’, *abc.net.au* 15/08/2013, social work was constructed by focusing primarily on the social care function and traditional charity discourses with workers as carers of the disadvantaged. As shown in Table 18 (p. 153), the majority of coverage focused on the ability of a worker to care for the wellbeing of individuals and groups. While there was a degree of overlap with practice methods (Table 14, pp. 147-148), this category of the media analysis instrument looked towards the larger social function presupposed in the reporting, as opposed to specific methods of practice. The analysis of the social function began with determining whether the function was care and/or control in the reporting, but the categories extended inductively to what is
presented in the table. The first six categories can be grouped more generally within a social care model of the profession and it is only by the seventh category (‘Gatekeepers of welfare services’) that elements of social control becomes a factor.

Table 18: News analysis - Social function

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social function</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caring for people and their wellbeing</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocates for social justice</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safeguarding children &amp; young people</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting disadvantaged individuals, groups &amp; communities</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consciousness &amp; awareness raising</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gatekeepers of welfare services</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gateway to welfare services</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting social change</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>459</strong></td>
<td><strong>100.0%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As mentioned, the social care function was also linked to broader charity discourses as identified in the language used to describe social workers. Frequently used words include selfless, persistent, earnest, and as shown in the quote below, being referred to as the ‘authentic voices’ by former prime minister Kevin Rudd:

> The bus next lurched to Mount Druitt, where the Prime Minister addressed a crowd of the Labor faithful from Unions NSW at the Wests Tradies Club. He talked about the Upstairs-Downstairs nature of an Abbott-governed Australia. He told the people gathered – nurses, social workers, bricklayers – they were ‘the authentic voices of Australia’.

(‘You’ve got to hand it to him: Kevin keeps going despite all snags’, theage.com.au, 7/09/2013)

The majority of reporting did not rely upon stereotypes (see Table 19, p. 153) but the ones that did, within a social care discourse, focused on the image of the ‘well-meaning but hapless social worker’ (‘Earning their web stripes’, The Age, 07.02.2013).
Table 19: News analysis - Stereotypes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stereotypes</th>
<th>Frequency (n)</th>
<th>Per cent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-specific</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>80.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well-meaning but hapless</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dictatorial &amp; unethical</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do-gooders</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Captives &amp; apologists for the establishment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bleeding hearts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisers of the poor</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical intent on changing our society</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>459</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evidenced in the quote below, there were several examples (n = 45) of social workers being portrayed as acting against the best interests of the client, despite their good intentions.

One social worker who came to visit tried to create a memory box with my dad, filling it with mementos of happy days gone by. This activity just made him cry, as though he knew that for him a happy life was over. As a result, the social worker decided against this exercise, leaving a box entitled Michael’s Memories lying around the house.’ (‘I lost my Dad to Alzheimer’s’, *Sunday Herald Sun Magazine*, 16.06.2013)

While in most instances the ‘well-meaning but hapless’ social worker was of relatively minor consequence, there were several articles (n = 15) where the reporting was more critical of the inability of social workers to fully understand the complexity of the issues they deal with. One article published by conservative columnist Andrew Bolt drew upon this stereotype in writing:

What can a few more social workers fix when more than 630,000 families don’t have mum or dad living with them? What can a mere law do when porn flows into every computer in almost every dark home? When beer is celebrated more on TV than faith? It is for us all to fix a culture not safe for children of people dead to love and deaf to duty. (*When Neglect Turns to Rage*, *Herald Sun*, 1/04/2013)
Within this stereotype, a naive profession was constructed that is hampered by the reality of practice beyond their noble goals and ideals. The reporting was once again less critical of individual workers or their motivation but the emphasis was on the naivety of professionals who see the world optimistically and do not grapple with the full complexity of the social realities they are attempting to change. The significance is that while not overtly negative, the reporting constructed social work as mainly an ineffective profession.

ii. Social work as social control

News media reporting that used social control discourses to construct the profession (see Table 18 p. 153) focused primarily on the profession’s role as ‘gatekeepers’ and their powers within protective services. This was deemed to be the more critical of the reporting analysed. Coverage within this discourse proved to be critical of social work in its ability to support individuals, including the competency of those who carry out this type of work. The underlying idea is that social workers, and their motives, are not to be trusted:

The submission of the Australian Association of Social Workers to the Senate inquiry into the NDIS bill demonstrates self-seeking wrapped in concern. Social workers fear the ‘transition from block funding to individual funding packages’ may threaten the viability of the service system – that is, their jobs. (*Beware Self-interest Dressed as Social Conscience*, *The Australian*, 12.02.2013)

Social work was constructed as a profession that does not wield its significant power effectively and is driven by self-interest rather than the humanitarian goals that are espoused. Social workers were described as liars, as shown earlier, and generally inept in their ability to carry out their tasks. This presents a further dichotomy, as while the profession was constructed around social control, reporting was critical of this and in many instances also their ability to carry out their social control function effectively.
Either by over reacting:

A top child protection investigator yesterday accused social workers of ‘over reacting’ to some reports of abuse, comparing the kids in care to the ‘stolen generation’ of Aboriginal children. ('Alarm at soaring number of kids in foster care', news.com.au, 08.03.2013)

or not acting soon enough:

A social worker arrived a day after the cigarette burn was reported to find the little girl dressed in a hat and reluctant to show her face. When asked about the burn, the then three-year-old said, ‘Mum hit there’ and ‘Mum did that’. Despite this, no further action was taken. ('Kiesha’s tragedy: trail of neglect and abuse', theage.com.au, 26.06.2013)

Abuse of power within this context also became a recurrent topic as reporting focused on instances of unethical practice including sexual abuse ('Seventh abuse case puts Labor under pressure', The Australian, 06.05.2013) and misappropriating resources ('Gambler social worker jailed for stealing from domestic violence victims', theaustralian.com.au, 06.09.2013). Social workers were constructed as corruptible individuals who betrayed the wellbeing of their clients for their own selfish interests. The articles did not make inferences about the profession as a whole but rather focused on the failure of individuals. In these examples, the AASW was not cited or sought for comment.

The dominant beliefs about the tension between the social care and control functions of the profession have been written about and debated extensively in the literature. The analysis suggests that social work in the media was constructed using a dichotomous understanding of these discourses similar to those present in the more aspirational elements of the social work literature and general discussion, viewing care as the true purpose of the profession and control as something to discard. These concepts and their tensions will be further explored throughout and in relation to participants’ formation and maintenance of their social work identity.
5.6 Researcher and participant media analysis: Summary of findings

The researcher and participant media analysis findings presented a new understanding in regard to the way the profession is constructed in the news media. The analysis did not reflect the dominant assumptions on this topic, as coverage was not overwhelmingly negative and, instead, it was mostly absent. This absence was characterised not just by the lack of reporting with comparable professions, but also the lack of detail. Furthermore, the analysis presented social work’s limited media portrayals that did provide detail as being more diverse, occasionally critical and definitely more favourable than previously assumed. Child protection was not the most reported field and the analysis did not find many instances of coverage being highly critical of the profession. Social workers themselves were also constructed using far more varied demographics than argued in the literature and of surprise to participants, recognised mostly as tertiary trained. Furthermore, reporting seemed to rely on a dichotomous understanding of social care and social control discourses mirroring some of the tensions and struggles in the professional community regarding the function and purpose of the profession.

These discoveries created the foundations for participants to discuss why social work was absent from the news media.

5.7 Participants’ discussion of explanatory factors

Throughout the interviews and workshops the discussion sometimes focused on attempting to explain why social work seemed mainly absent from the news media. The literature presents various reasons for the assumed negative coverage, focusing on newsworthy criteria (Aldridge 1991) and the conservative ideological agenda of privately owned news sources (Mendes 2001a; Galilee 2005). The main theme to come from the discussion was the incompatibility between social work practice and the news media, including broader issues regarding the deprofessionalisation of social work and its lack of understanding and recognition. This section will present the main explanatory arguments as proposed by participants and determined through the thematic analysis of workshop and interview data.
i. **What makes news?**

In attempting to understand why social workers receive such little coverage, the vast majority of participants said that it is due to the fact that the news media does not understand social work, its function and contribution. Social work practice was deemed to have a complexity and purpose that goes beyond the realm of news reporting, which has a tendency to focus on negative stories:

> It’s frustrating because what is newsworthy are stories that don’t go well. It’s newsworthy when we can be critical of a negative outcome. I feel like that’s been about child protection cases, but parole and justice sort of stuff, either this sense of lack of resources, (or) not valued to get more money, or it doesn’t matter if we get rid of money (because) what is this service doing with this money, or negative outcome for a person: ‘Look at how this social work has ruined this person or done this wrong’. *(Participant 1, Interview)*

As has been argued in the literature, the criteria used to determine whether a story is suitable to a news medium deems a lot of social work coverage not worthy of reporting, unless it can be clearly labelled a failure (Aldridge 1991). Participants argued that it is only in these instances that the news media takes an interest in the profession and does not portray, or fully comprehend, the complexity of practice and narrows social work to limited fields. While this was never established as an ideological attack, it was deemed to be symptomatic of a medium that relies on stereotypes for reporting and lacks factual scrutiny. This further compounded a general sense of mistrust in the news media by participants in its ability to portray, understand and appreciate the complexity and contribution of social work practice in such a limited medium.

The complexity of the media analysis findings challenged some of these assumptions and led to the reconstruction of knowledge for participants, as will be explored in Chapter 8. As identified previously, although the findings from the media analysis challenged participants’ assumptions, this did not dramatically alter their relationship with the news media as it continued to be of an adversarial nature. The big difference was that instead of feeling hated, they now felt ignored.
ii. The deprofessionalisation of social work

Participants believed that the deprofessionalisation of social work was a significant factor in the lack of coverage. Several participants (n = 13) argued that this has led to social workers rarely being able to work in roles that identify them as such, and therefore the title is losing relevance. The idea that social work is in the process of deprofessionalisation, as expressed by participants, has been written about extensively in the professional literature. Healy & Meagher (2004, p. 244) claim that deprofessionalisation for social work has been characterised by the ‘fragmentation and routinisation’ of social work and consequent loss of ‘creativity, reflexivity and discretion’ for practitioners in direct practice.

As Healy & Meagher (2004, p. 245) argue:

The Australian social services labour force provides startling evidence of the trend towards a relative decline in the presence of professional social workers in the human services field (and) the disproportionate growth of paraprofessional employment compared to professional employment in social service occupations.

Participants suggested that these paraprofessional roles, including case manager and welfare worker positions, contribute to the high levels of confusion in the broader community, diminishing the professional standing of social work. The core understanding was that welfare positions are being fragmented into numerous different job titles resulting in social work not receiving as much coverage as it once did. Participants also identified that social workers may be receiving coverage but are being identified by their job rather than professional title.

As written previously, during the critical reflection period, participants observed that there were several instances where individuals who they knew to be qualified social workers, for example, Chris Tanti and Kon Karapanagiotidis, were never identified by their degree. This was deemed to be evidence of the low professional capital, as participants suggested that in order to be seen as an expert and a legitimate public voice, social workers had to distance themselves from their profession. The news media reflects participants’ daily practice experiences, as clients and co-workers fail to understand the difference between social
work and the numerous other welfare positions within welfare services. In particular, there was a clear resentment of the social work skill set being narrowed to case management, as was seen in several news reports. Ultimately, participants suggested that the reason why social work was absent was due to the fact that the title holds little relevance, is not understood and is lost amongst the vast amount of other welfare professionals.

iii. The failure of the AASW

During the interviews and workshops the majority of participants highlighted the failure of the AASW in promoting the profession. Participants expressed a great deal of disappointment and frustration with the organisation that they felt had not done an appropriate job in raising the status of social work in the public sphere. The AASW was seen to be an organisation that was motivated by self-interest rather than the importance of improving the professional standing. This was a continued point of interest as the organisation represented for many the failures of the profession, especially in being able to organise and mobilise effectively. From the cost of membership being prohibitive to the absence of a public profile, participants questioned the existence of such an organisation that was failing in one of their most important responsibilities, the promotion of the social value of social work that they observe in their direct practice successes.

Participants believed that it is the responsibility of the AASW to highlight to the rest of the community the worthwhile work undertaken by the profession in supporting those that are most vulnerable. Participants suggested that the need for registration was the most achievable and immediate way of improving the profession’s status, and whose responsibility lies primarily with the AASW. The fact that it has not occurred in Australia, but has in the USA and the UK, was deemed to be a failure of the organisation, although no participant discussed the debate and contention within the wider professional community regarding the need for registration (Chenoweth & McAuliffe 2011). Participants expressed that their energies are devoted to practice and as an all-consuming activity they expect their professional body to address these larger issues. As evidenced by the quote on p. 159, all the participants ultimately expressed a sense of disillusionment over the competency of the AASW:
I want to be stronger in my sense of professional identity and being proud because I like being a social worker that prompted me to join the AASW and then I get so frustrated with them! I’m expecting them to raise the profile in the media and it’s just not happening. I don’t know their internal mechanism, maybe they’re entirely powerless as well ...

( Participant 10, Workshop 2)

The frustration with the AASW extended to their engagement with the news media in terms of advocacy and raising awareness. Participants queried why organisational bodies like the Australian Medical Association (AMA) and the Australian Psychological Society (APS) are frequently sought for opinion on major social issues, but not the AASW. Participants questioned the ability of the organisation to engage with media outlets and in particular the struggle to agree on a single message on any given topic. One participant who, as a member of the AASW has maintained a keen on interest in the media releases, stated:

I looked at AASW media releases, they tend to be a bit wussy, it’s like they’re not trying to ruffle feathers to the point that they’re not effective ...
... Wishy washy media releases and they did one on asylum seekers and got it wrong! ( Participant 15, Interview)

The participant argued that the AASW did not communicate the social justice values of the profession and provided generalist comments in their releases that were factually incorrect on asylum seeker policy. The participant was able to confidently identify this error as the topic was related to her field of practice. There was also general frustration with the timeliness of these statements and rejection of the association’s claims that releases need to be properly researched as just an excuse (AASW Bulletin 2012), as this was not an impediment for other associations. While some recognition was given to the president’s recent attempts to engage with the media, it was deemed ineffective, and possibly self-serving, as the statements are rarely read beyond social work circles.

Three participants expressed mistrust in the AASW in its ability to do what is in the best interests of the profession.
I’m not a member of the AASW and there are reasons why I haven’t been a member. There was a few years ago when the idea of registering professions and the AASW would expand their membership to include welfare workers. Oh my god! Why would I be a member of an organisation that’s meant to protect my profession, and then opens the doors ... it was about money... *(Participant 19, Workshop 2)*

As shown above, participants found it almost unforgivable that the organisation had once looked to paraprofessionals as members, although there was no exploration of the complexity of the issue and the motivations of the association beyond money. This was seen as a betrayal of the professional project and an inconceivable decision in the pursuit of professional recognition. Participants who had direct experience with the organisation, which will be explored later in Chapter 8, had argued that it was in a state of chaos with conflicting priorities and self-interest marring most decision-making abilities. The inability to become a registered profession was identified as a failure of this organisation and this directly impacted participants’ status as professionals. Registration became a key point as, until it is in place, anyone is able to identify as a social worker without any legal consequence and therefore workers were unable to claim an exclusive professional status. Participants did not acknowledge the possible contradiction between the diversity of the profession, which they all celebrated, and the limiting aspects of professional registration given its predominantly health-based understanding of social work (Chenoweth & McAuliffe 2011). It is proposed by participants that the internal disorder of the AASW has resulted in it being unable to promote it effectively, leading in part to a lack of media coverage and therefore an absence from the public sphere.

The focus was almost exclusively on what the AASW has not done and very little discussion regarding individual member action, including their own. In this regard, social workers were positioned as very passive social agents who were overly determined and dependent on larger organisations, including the AASW and the news media. These points will be explored in greater depth in Part Three in relation to the identity formation processes that were occurring in this instance and throughout the research.
5.8 Conclusion

As a social institution, the news media is a source for meaning making and reality construction that has undoubted influence over the way societies and individuals understand the world around them (Bell & Garrett 1998; Franklin & Parton 1991; Ott & Mack 2009). It is also understood to be a source of ‘truths’ and a site for dominant discourses (Ott & Mack 2009). As such, researching how the news media constructed the profession addressed a significant research gap and provided the discursive context from which to explore the impacts for workers and practice. In working with the twenty research participants over the twelve-month period, the process aimed to research the topic with a rigour and depth of analysis absent from most work. The researcher and participant media analysis findings demonstrated that while social work may be absent from the news media, what limited coverage there was proved to be far more diverse, and even favourable, than assumed. Furthermore, in attempting to understand the absence, participants believed that it was possibly due to the incompatibility between social work practice and the news media, and also larger issues regarding the deprofessionalisation of social work and its lack of understanding and recognition. Ultimately, the findings did not reflect the dominant assumptions within the literature and professional community regarding social work’s news media coverage.

These discoveries created the foundations for participants to explore how social work reporting affected them at a professional and personal level. The next chapter will present and discuss the main insights from the critical reflection process in relation to how participants identified that the news media impacts direct practice, clients, co-workers and their organisational contexts.
Chapter 6: Theme 2 – News media and social work practice

6.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the key insights and main themes from participants’ critical reflection of the interpersonal impacts, focusing primarily on practice. Through the use of thematic analysis, five sub-themes were identified in the data. These include the impacts on larger public attitudes, their clients, direct practice, multidisciplinary work and their organisational context. Drawing upon the data from the participant journals, interviews and workshops, this chapter will explore how news media portrayals of the profession shape the multifaceted act of social work practice.

6.2 Sub-theme 2.1: Social work, the news media and the broader society

In researching how news media portrayals of the profession affect practice, every participant initially focused on the role that reporting has on shaping and reflecting broader societal attitudes towards the profession, as typified in the quote below.

... your (referring to the general public) understanding of what we do is so unclear, you really have no understanding of what we do and isn’t it great that you’ve never had to meet a social worker aren’t you a lucky person that you’ve never been in a situation that you’ve needed that ... What we do is very unseen, it’s very hidden and therefore people don’t understand it because it is, whether it’s too hard to talk about, what we do or the actual nature of what we do is unseen ... (Participant 2, Interview)

Exploring the interpersonal impacts of news media coverage, which was recognised to be predominantly absent, participants identified at a macro level the lack of understanding, recognition and appreciation as a significant problem. This served as an introductory discussion point before moving on to the specifics of individual clients and practice situations. Participants used the news media to represent broader societal attitudes towards the profession, using the two concepts interchangeably. This identified that while
the news media was understood to be of major significance, it represented larger professional recognition issues. Participants reported that the poor understanding towards the profession was further reinforced by the lack of coverage, leading to a group of professionals without broader public understanding, and therefore support. This was argued to also directly limit opportunity, which will be explored in the next section of this chapter.

When we should be portrayed accurately we are not there at all! What hope do we have of being valued as professionals? So the way this impacts me professionally is when I say I’m a social worker I feel that that holds very little value and my clients go, ‘well what’s that?’ You have psychologists coming out and family therapists having their opinion, what about in terms of the rights of the child? As social workers, that is what we do, even if you’re not in child protection... I still believe that social workers because of our education that (is) still such an important issue ... essentially you’re promoting the interest of a population who can’t voice their own needs ... (Participant 1, Interview)

Participants used language that identified social work as largely an invisible and misunderstood profession for the general population, where they are in the background of major social issues but rarely acknowledged. This was recognised as being due to the fact that social work is ‘too challenging’ (Participant 2) for society and therefore people would rather be ignorant of the struggles faced by the profession. Social work was also described as ‘mopping up’ (Participant 7) after other professions, and in this sense, using cleaning imagery to construct the profession as having an important but not necessarily prestigious function. Participants expressed frustration and a great deal of struggle with the need for recognition:

Social work is a nuanced field, shades of grey and there’s no black or white in what we do and that doesn’t work for news. News media takes a particular stand and ignores lots of other factors that are going on ‘cause it makes a good story to say this and this, so I get frustrated that what we do and the balancing of different needs from different people and such
isn’t appreciated. Appreciated is not the work because I don’t want to say ‘I want to be appreciated’ but people don’t get it and it doesn’t come across. (Participant 16, Interview)

As evidenced in the quote above, the absence of coverage was explained by most participants as being in part the result of this struggle and the lack of clear and easily reportable victories in social work. Participants expressed that during the critical reflection process, and building on past experience, they were able to identify a profession that was not criticised, as much as it was misunderstood. The news media was argued to be an organisation whose interests do not lie in understanding the complexity and diversity of social phenomena and therefore rely on stereotypes and simple narratives in their reporting.

There’s a complete lack of presence in the media. It affects me because it undermines and devalues our profession, people have no awareness of the legitimacy of what we actually do. I often feel very resentful and I don’t know where to point my resentment to the AASW or the Unions back in the 70s who ruined a lot of professional stuff we have now. I get resentful and angry that I can see psychologist perspectives on things ... I never see anything, even on the ABC, there’s rarely anything on social work or their perspectives ... (Participant 10, Interview)

The discovery that coverage was absent further reinforced deep issues regarding the profession, which was argued to be experienced, as confusing and unclear by those whom they work with and the broader population. Discussing broader public attitudes towards the profession, and not specifically the news media, was used by all the participants to frame the discussion around issues of professional identity and status. It identified that the news media was seen as one part of a larger problem that in some respects undermines their ability to practice and carry out the profession’s social justice aims. The reflection process further developed, in part, participants’ understanding of broader societal attitudes by focusing on the lack of awareness and limiting stereotypes instead of overtly negative assumptions. Participants focused on the broader population to provide a cultural and discursive context before moving onto specific examples of practice.
The next section will explore how participants expressed that the absence of coverage affected their clients.

6.3 Sub-theme 2.2: Social work clients

During the interviews and workshops, how news media portrayals of the profession affected clients became a central point. This was due to the fact that in their daily practice, clients were the group with whom participants had the greatest amount of contact. Issues regarding a client’s perception of social work became central to providing meaningful interventions. During the discussion participants drew upon both their personal experience and observations from the reflection process in exploring the impacts. The analysis identified three main points in relation to clients: the confusion, the significance of personal experience and the impacts on clients’ trust. The next section of this chapter will explore these points and draw upon interview and workshop data for examples.

i. The confusion

The link between news media portrayals of the profession and clients’ attitudes and beliefs was identified as mainly indirect. For example:

Stuff in the media feed the public image and the public image affects practice. It’s a fine line but there’s a connection and I think at times the public image is pretty poor, often negative things that hit the headlines or people who aren’t social workers that have few boundaries and poor training that are portrayed as social workers. People are left with the confusion ... I find people don’t really seem to know what we do.

(Participant 13, Interview)

Participants were unable to identify specific examples where their own practice was directly impacted by a single piece of reporting, but rather that news media plays a role in shaping public, and therefore client, attitudes towards the profession. The lack of coverage resulted in the vast majority of participants arguing that clients in general had high levels of confusion about who they were and how they could help. This confusion was in relation to
the role of social work and in particular how it differs from other professions, including youth workers and psychologists, and also how it varies across organisations, for example, child protection and community services.

I’m frustrated by the lack of understanding of the work and the lack of understanding of the resources and capacity. I say I’m a social worker and people don’t know what that means … (Participant 1, Interview)

When discussing client attitudes, participants focused on the initial stages of engagement, as this was when questions regarding their understanding usually arise. It was suggested that the absence of coverage contributes to clients not understanding the range of interventions and support that can be provided. This was expressed as almost a daily affirmation of the lack of public status, as for the most part clients did not seem to express anger when meeting a social worker, but rather indifference. Participants who took part in the study worked across numerous fields and although there were some differences in terms of client attitudes, for example, those working with adults in drug and alcohol fields were never assumed to be child protection officers, the confusion regarding the expertise of social workers was shared. While social work may be commonly associated with protective services, as the literature suggests, this was not recognised as an issue of major significance for participants, even those working in paediatric and family-specific fields. Participants reported that while there may be a level of curiosity and apprehension regarding the link between them and protective services, it was not automatically assumed. Participants identified that the client’s own history played a much larger role in this, as will be explored in the next section.

ii. The significance of personal experience

People sometimes assume child protection, but it’s more than ones that have had child protection involvement … (Participant 14, Interview)

In the discussion regarding the influence of news media on clients, participants employed what could be argued to be elements of agenda setting theory (McCombs 2004) in their views on the effects of media coverage. Agenda setting theory argues that the media will
only be of significance in the absence of personal experience and will not determine what someone thinks but rather what they think about (McCombs 2004). Participants’ understanding of media influence identified the importance of personal experience, especially in relation to child protection practices. Even for workers who have worked in family support and protection-related fields, the presumption that they were child protection was only there from clients who had prior experience with protective services. As evidenced in the statement below, participants proposed that while the association with child protection is dominant due to historical practices, personal experience has far greater significance in shaping the attitudes of clients in the early stages of engagement.

... you come in and try to work with them well, they’re already like ‘she’s hopeless, she’s not going to know what she’s doing!’ and see you as pretty much ‘she works for the government she’s going to take my child off me!’ and that’s pretty much about it. It can be from the media but probably more personal experience. I’ve had families say to me I’ve read about this and I’ve read about that especially when a social worker has been charged with something but it’s more their experience of engaging with (protective) services when they haven’t had a good outcome ...

(Participant 18, Workshop 1)

The degree of possible trepidation experienced by clients was also identified as only pertaining to the initial engagement stage. The ability of the individual worker played a much more important role in shaping clients’ understanding than anything they may have seen or read. Several participants, and in particular those that have been practising for more than ten years (n = 8), also identified as part of the reflection process a perceived historical shift in public and client attitudes. The main point is that since the early nineties, they believe the association with child protection and social work has decreased, possible due to the deprofessionalisation of the sector, and that the association was experienced more for older clients. Therefore, while the link between social work and child protection was present, personal experience and the ability of the worker to engage and build trust was identified by participants to play a more significant role.
iii. The impact on clients’ trust

As typified in the quote below, client trust became a central issue in regard to how participants’ identified the impacts:

I don’t have much confidence that my clients know what a social worker is, I always every time I meet someone new explain that I’m a social worker usually because people make an assumption that I’m a psychologist. I’m conscious that often I get questioned about what’s a social worker. Professionally it’s a bit undermining, I feel devalued because my clients have no sense of what that is or have any value in it. There have been numerous conversations over the past where people say ‘oh but this is a really tricky case! Should we see a psychologist?’

(Participant 11, Workshop 2)

While several participants spoke of clients infrequently being hesitant to engage with workers out of the belief that they may be child protection, especially those who had prior protective experience, the biggest issue was in relation to the trust in the competency of workers. One participant observed a direct link between the absence of social work in the news media and the value that clients place on the profession:

Clients and co-workers question the professional status of social work quite strongly; it’s a combination of personal experience and the media ...

( Participant 10, Interview)

The concern focused on the suitability and competency of the professional that has been tasked with helping them, more than any protective fears they may hold. This presented a new understanding on the impact of news media as the majority of the literature focuses on the concern regarding the worker’s underlying protective motives as hampering trust, not their professional ability. Several participants observed that the absence of social work in the broader public sphere creates a level of professional mistrust and a desire by clients to be seen by someone more qualified. In particular in regard to counselling, as it was seen to be the domain of psychologists and not social workers whose skill set was deemed less
professional and equated potentially with pastoral care practices. The majority of participants suggested that this is evidence of the low professional worth that social work holds, exacerbated and perpetuated by a news media that does not understand the profession. The next section continues to explore the impacts on clients in relation to the effects of media coverage on direct practice.

6.4 Sub-theme 2.3: Social work direct practice

In relation to direct practice, participants described a varied range of impacts, the severity of which depended on their field of practice. Participants who had current and past experience in child protection services (n = 5) discussed instances where their practice had received coverage and the negative effects this had on a range of issues. This was in stark contrast to the other fifteen participants who upon reflection found that while news media portrayals or the possibility of coverage affected them in both positive and negative ways, this occurred predominantly in the initial stages of engagement and otherwise was not of major significance. This section will discuss how news media portrayals shape practice, focusing on: the effects on engagement and role clarification, the risk of media scrutiny, the experience of receiving media coverage and the impacts of using the news media for advocacy.

i. Engagement and role clarification

Drawing upon insights from the reflection process and past experience, the majority (n = 15) of participants observed that the news media affected primarily the early stages of engagement.

News media affects the engagement stage and I clearly articulate my role and why I’m there and my role in protective situations, it’s something conscious but never explained that it should be done. (Participant 2, Interview)

As written previously, an indirect link was identified by participants between news coverage and broader societal attitudes towards the profession that affect client trust. The lack of,
and sometimes negative, coverage was suggested to be a hurdle in building a working relationship with clients for several reasons, including their questionable professional competency and the belief that they are child protection. Drawing on past experience and insights from the reflection process, several participants observed that this had positive effects on their practice leading them to place greater focus on the need for role clarification. This included outlining their qualifications, actively acknowledging child protection concerns, and how their own services are related, as demonstrated in the quote below.

... It does affect my practice, it makes you work harder in articulating what you do, and you have to identify barriers stopping people from engaging. You feel you have to prove yourself and worth to families. My role clarification has evolved over time and it’s really important to understand if the family has a previous experience with social workers...

(Participant 6, Interview)

Once engagement has been established, news media reporting of the profession was not deemed to be of major significance as the micro encounter of practice was far more meaningful than anything clients read or saw. The majority of participants were aware of the importance of role clarification and for several (n = 5) it reemphasised its significance and was incorporated into their redeveloped practice, which will be explored in Chapter 8.

ii. The risk of media scrutiny

Several participants (n = 4) identified that the risk of media scrutiny, although never receiving coverage themselves, had made them more vigilant regarding their practice. While most had never met a social worker who had received negative reporting, it was based on the ‘horror stories out there’ of social workers being ‘named and shamed’ (Participant 5, Interview) on the front of newspapers. The reporting of coroner’s inquests also raised participants’ anxieties about having to justify their work in courtrooms during cross examination. For the most part this was expressed as being a form of anxiety that made workers pay closer attention to making sure their notes were correctly written and that their practice was of the highest possible standard, as one participant notes:
... I think just early on in terms of just documentation having read things (in the media) about social work going to court and getting grilled on the stand and being torn apart because of their files has always made me very vigilant. At times I really resent that and at times I question the point of writing everything down ... but I actually learnt to value that not just cause of that sense of security, you do come to realise how useful that is. *(Participant 5, Interview)*

For two participants it seemed to be used as a conscious strategy to assure that their work was of a high standard, with one worker reporting that when making intervention choices she would repeatedly ask herself what would happen if her practice was made public and on the front of a newspaper. This strategy, while inducing a small degree of anxiety, served as an effective motivator in making sure that the work was completed to an appropriate standard:

> It can affect me when it’s dicey, when there may be some safety issues. How may this be perceived? It can make one go ‘OOH!’ and get this wriggle, what would happen if this went public? My confidence as a worker is affected by other things, the thing about the media, it’s just a little bit. *(Participant 15, Interview)*

Participants expressed that upon deeper reflection the fear of media scrutiny has had some positive impacts and made some workers (n = 2) slightly alter their practice with a greater focus on the better documentation of practice. The underlying belief was that given the media’s tendency for sensationalism, the reporting would not portray the complexity of the situations and decision-making that participants engaged in, and simply highlights failures. While the fear of negative media coverage was hypothetical for some, it was a harsh reality for several of the research participants, as will be discussed in the next section.
iii. The experience of receiving media coverage

Four participants had the unique experience of receiving direct media coverage. This was in the context of protective services and the reporting was highly critical of their work. While their experiences varied, there were common themes in regard to the inherent challenges, crises and the strategies used to overcome such a difficult period. Participants spoke of the difficulty in seeing their own practice in the media in relation to its failures. In two of the cases it was in relation to child deaths, and while the articles did not specifically blame them, they felt as though they were being held responsible. All four were confident that they had worked ethically and professionally to the best of their ability, and did not regret any professional decisions. Despite this, participants spoke of the feelings of failure that accompanied them given that a child had died, and made them momentarily question their future within the profession. In these more extreme cases participants spoke of the impacts on their practice. Besides the mental health issues, which will be explored in Chapter 7, their practice in the short term had become far more risk averse, self-questioning and hyper-vigilant, but seemingly no significant changes in the long term. This was reported to be due to the confidence that they have in their own work and profession and that the scrutiny and harsh judgement came from the news media, which they argued did not understand the complexity of practice.

(I was) hyper vigilant and always thought I was doing a bad job, no support (from organisation) at the time, my name was everywhere ...
What am I doing here? Then I reminded myself I’m doing this for a reason. I did not question my profession ... the blame was on the workers, and you ask yourself am I good enough? Am I a failure? Why are we blaming protective workers? But there were no long-term effects.

(Participant 18, Interview)

The organisational response and support during the time of coverage was deemed far more important and how managers dealt with the scrutiny had far greater impacts on practice than the reporting itself. Participants’ spoke of media scrutiny leading to organisational crises and the constant need for answers from the higher political ranks. A sense of panic gripped the workplace and the wellbeing of workers was overlooked in order to maintain
the reputation of the organisation. During these instances, participants expressed that workers were scapegoated and the news media and senior managers did not grapple with the complexities of the decision-making that occurs in protective services. As evidenced below, participants expressed a firm belief in their profession that did not waver in the long term.

It affected my work for a very long time, senior people wanted to know what was happening and affected how we felt about the case. I adapted my practice to the new level of scrutiny...a risk averse way of managing clients, using punitive measures that started to institutionalise him...(it) increased the level of paperwork and scrutiny. We had been doing some good work but that was never acknowledged. The news media presents a skewed view of how the system works and I’d do everything the same again ... the media had no (long-term) consequence (on practice) ...

( Participant 8, Interview)

Therefore, while receiving media coverage was deemed very challenging, the organisational support proved almost as important in shaping how workers practice. The intrapersonal effects of receiving media coverage will continue to be explored in Chapter 7.

iv. The impacts of using the news media for advocacy

A notable exception was a participant who has engaged with the media, using it for advocacy for both individual clients and services. The participant was a high profile social worker who has been singled out for positive media reporting in the past for the development of internationally recognised and acclaimed support programs. The participant had historically used the news media but encountered organisational resistance and resentment given the fact that the media was being engaged without managerial consent, stating:

I stopped doing media on the work because it had a negative impact on fellow social workers and managers, previous managers instructed me not to do any media work. (Participant 20, Interview)
This resulted in the participant limiting the use of media as an advocacy tool, which decreased her resourcing and awareness-raising capabilities. This presents a unique perspective, as while the majority of writing strongly supports the continued engagement with the media as an effective tool for practice and a means towards improving the profile for the profession, there is very little written about the challenges that this may raise. The strategies assume that social workers exist beyond the confines of their organisational role and therefore are free to act as ‘independent’ professionals. This example demonstrates that while media engagement may be beneficial to practice, it can be difficult without organisational support, and if this does not occur can lead to internal resentment.

The next section of this chapter explores how news media portrayals of the profession affect the relationships with other professionals.

6.5 Sub-theme 2.4: Social work and multidisciplinary work

In relation to the impact on other professionals and multidisciplinary work, participants once again observed a correlation between the absence of coverage and the lack of professional status in their workplace.

I had that comment from a colleague who was a psychologist who said if you get the hard cases flick them to me because I’m a psychologist ... and I do consider myself generally a confident person I do remember feeling gutted over that ... We need to be brave enough to stand up and say well actually this is what a social worker is and I’m proud to be a social worker and if that doesn’t come from us who is it going to come from?  

(Participant 11, Interview)

In working with other professionals, including doctors, teachers, nurses and psychologists, participants reported that the absence of reporting contributes to a general sense of confusion and questioning of the professional expertise of workers. This became a recurrent theme as participants shared encounters where professional opinions and assessments were dismissed due to the perceived lack of training. This was identified as a daily struggle and relied strongly on worker’s own confidence and ability to contest this perception.
Participants spoke of using several strategies to challenge this idea from role and background clarification through to the use of humour. Participants argued that the lack of coverage leads social work to be an ‘unknown thing’ (Participant 13, Interview) and that this directly impacts referrals, resource allocations and the ability to provide a meaningful contribution to the organisational decision-making process. The lack of professional status was exemplified through the devaluation of social work skills:

I had problems with a (senior worker) who thought social work is all about filling out forms for Centrelink, which I become quite resentful with. I do my utmost to try and explain but that’s how he sees it. I didn’t go to university for so many years to learn how to fill out a Centrelink form, it can be tricky ... I feel belittled. (Participant 13, Workshop 3)

The lack of detail in the small amounts of social work coverage was described as being a contributor to how other professionals understand the social work skill set. Participants argued that the lack of coverage results in colleagues understanding social work around the stereotypes of form fillers or protective workers. Participants suggested that the lack of individuals who understand social work capabilities in management positions has led to the lack of appropriate referrals, for example, counselling should always go to a psychologist, and the view of social work as a non-vital service resulting in less numbers of workers. A participant discussed how this resulted in workers feeling as though they are undervalued and that their professional assessment and opinion does not carry the same argumentative strength as other professions:

Working in a large team, I’ve certainly felt bottom of the pack working with psychologists and some counsellors, made to feel that social work is like a third rate psychologist. It’s quite depressing, I want to be stronger in my sense of professional identity and being proud. (Participant 10, Workshop 1)

The lack of professional status that participants suggest is reflected and compounded by the media coverage, resulted in one case where a participant was asked to no longer identify as a social worker and use a more generic wellbeing title. This was experienced as a clear sign
of the lower recognition of the profession. Although other participants spoke of working in organisations where no professional uses their title in order to create professional egalitarian culture, this was an instance where this occurred against the worker’s wishes. Resistance to these kinds of situations resulted in participants learning to better promote the profession within their organisation and consciously provide education about social work as a balance to the general silence they experience. For several participants, the renewed focus on interdisciplinary promotion was a direct result of the research process and will be explored in greater depth in the reconstructed approaches to practice section of this chapter.

6.6  **Sub-theme 2.5: Social work and the organisational context**

In exploring the impacts of news media reporting at an organisational level, participants identified the importance of a measured and supportive response:

> Other places there’s almost a fear of media type of thing, an example in the media opens up that anxiety and that fear that we could be scrutinized in that way, where’s there’s not that collective sense of just being quite confident in what you’re doing and how you’re doing then that would breed quite quickly amongst the team ... *(Participant 5, Interview)*

While this was not an issue of major significance for the majority of participants (*n* = 16), four whose practice is in high profile fields deemed it an important consequence of media reporting. Two forms of reactions were identified by participants: support (for those in hospitals) and panic (for those in child protection services). Working in hospitals, two participants reported that while their work was not the focus of reporting, their clients and organisation were the source of frequent, almost weekly, media coverage. While for the most part this was identified as being non critical, historically there have been numerous examples where the competency of the organisation, and the social work department, were drawn into question.
I was horrified (at seeing my own practice get negative coverage) and I felt quite violated. My initial response is to say to my higher boss ‘What are we going to do about this! These things should be a criminal matter, violated is a really good word and then I calmed down. I was able to rationalise it and calmed down and when I was more informed that my organisation was following it through I was okay with it then and then I felt as a team we were quite uniformed. (Participant 14, Interview)

As shown above, participants who worked in hospitals reported that the organisational response to critical coverage was calm and protective, rather than anxious and reactionary. Participants expressed that they felt supported by the organisation in that it managed to investigate allegations in a helpful manner that did not assume guilt and did not look to punish but improve services. The high profile nature of their practice and the balance between negative and positive coverage created a context in which workers were not fearful of exposure. This was in contrast to the participants who worked in public sector protective services.

The two participants who worked in child protection services expressed a sense of panic and recrimination from their organisation when their practice received coverage. Even though the organisation has a media unit and a long history of media interest, the response in their view seemed to be guided by a broader concern of political fallout and the need to identify the individuals at fault and make them accountable. This was deemed by participants to be a toxic response that in part contributes to the high turnover that the field experiences. Participants observed that a culture of fear permeated this service and this was experienced at all levels, including the lack of positive self-promotion from the organisation. As opposed to hospitals, participants who had worked in child protection argued that through a misguided understanding of confidentiality, a culture of secrecy developed that did not allow workers to engage with the media and ultimately led to the lack of any positive promotion. This was identified as directly impacting participants’ sense of worth:

It makes you feel very despondent and it makes you feel very frustrated that the media portrays things so inaccurately, I’ve seen young people’s lives splashed across the media and it’s often quite incorrect information
... I find it very frustrating because as a child protection social worker you have very little voice of reply, you’re not allowed to speak to the media even to correct them it’s not something we engage in ... it’s made very clear from the beginning ... (Participant 8, Interview)

One participant highlighted how the media reporting of social issues impacts organisations’ resourcing and therefore practice. Working in the field of out-of-home care, an article during the reflection period drew attention to the hard work and poor remuneration of being a foster carer (‘Foster families out of pocket, sparking $6m top-up plea from Foster Care Association of Victoria’, The Age, 18.2.2014). The article was used as a form of advocacy to raise awareness of this situation and the need for increased funding. The participant reported an almost immediate drop in the number of individuals who were on the waiting list to be assessed for their suitability as carers as the article highlighted the emotional and financial hardships experienced. This case example demonstrates the complexity of the impacts of media coverage of social issues on practice. Analysis of how reporting of social issues impacts practice is beyond the scope of this thesis and provides opportunities for future research, a notable example being Zufferey’s (2007) exploration of reporting on homelessness and social work.

6.7 Conclusion

Chapter 6 has explored participants’ reflections on the relationship between news media and practice which led to the discovery of several key insights of relevance to the research question and aims. The discussion about the impacts of reporting identified larger themes for participants regarding societal attitudes towards a profession whose purpose and ability is not understood and therefore questioned. The confusion concerning the function of workers, beyond protective services, was the most significant impact, as participants believed that the lack of coverage contributes to a general sense of misunderstanding. Implicit in participants’ accounts were agenda setting theories of media influence as they identified that personal experience played a bigger role in terms of how clients understand the profession.
A key new insight for participants was that the lack of client trust stemmed not necessarily from the assumption that workers are ‘going to take the kids away’, as argued in the literature, but that the lack of coverage leads to a questioning of the professional competency of workers. The absence was identified by workers to be representative of and perpetuating the low professional status that social work holds leading it to be seen as a second-tier profession. The possibility of media coverage was deemed to have some positive impacts in making several workers hold their own work to a higher standard. Although rare, receiving media scrutiny of individual practice was reported as being a challenging experience, but whose impacts were not long-lasting. The more destructive elements were the organisational responses to reporting that created a toxic culture of anxiety and recrimination. The reflection process highlighted for most participants the limited impacts on daily practice, but presented larger issues regarding the deprofessionalisation and the poor recognition of the social work profession.

Exploring the impacts of news coverage on practice positioned social workers as part of a professional project that was unappreciated and misunderstood. How participants understood social work throughout these discussions, and how it differed from when the profession was discussed more broadly, will be the main focus of Part Three.

The next chapter of this thesis will explore the intrapersonal impacts of news media coverage as described by participants by focusing on identity, self-confidence and self-worth.
Chapter 7:  
Theme 3 – Identity, self-confidence and self-worth

7.1 Introduction

Throughout the interviews, and to some extent the workshops, discussion and follow-up questions focused on exploring the intrapersonal impacts of social work’s news media coverage. The questions broadly looked to better understand the effects that reporting had on participants’ professional identity, self-confidence and self-worth. While the effects of coverage were suggested by participants to be wide-ranging (including confidence, anxiety, reflection, frustration and the struggle with the need for recognition), they were all underscored by a clear frustration with the news media not understanding social work. The topic was explored in greater depth during the one-on-one interviews, possibly due to their more private and confidential nature. This section presents the main themes in relation to this topic as identified by the analysis of the research data.

While this chapter focuses on what participants reported, Part Three will draw on several points raised here (especially the degree of participant confidence in the aims of the social work profession), to explore in greater depth the professional identity formation and maintenance processes that were occurring throughout the research.

7.2 Professional identity and self-confidence

The majority of participants (n = 18) expressed that despite the variety of effects at an interpersonal level, the news media did not have a significant impact on their professional identity or practice confidence:

No, not my professional confidence ... it doesn’t affect my confidence to advocate for that child, personally it does affect my confidence. Outside of the context of work, outside I am reluctant to tell people what I do because it makes people uncomfortable and it’s a confidence thing if it makes people uncomfortable, it’s not that I’m not proud to be a social
worker, I love being a social worker, but that makes people uncomfortable ... I think on a personal level it can affect my confidence.

(Participant 2, Interview)

Practice confidence was influenced primarily by the social interaction of direct practice and their strong belief in the professional project. While the news media might have secondary effects, including an increase in anxiety, it did not undermine their trust in their profession or practice skill. Confidence was identified as changing through time and circumstance, with expected ebbs and flows, but when looking at their career as a whole, the impact was minimal. Most participants were dismissive of the idea that the news media would impact their sense of a professional identity and practice confidence, which they argued stems from a belief in the profession’s ideals and their extensive direct practice experience. Even for participants who had their practice exposed in the media (n = 4), the impacts were identified as being short term (months not years), and they noted a possible increase in confidence in the long term. This was because of their certainty that the profession’s fight for social justice is not without struggle, and negative media coverage was understood as being a clash between opposing world views. This further cemented the participants’ view that they were doing the right thing and it was larger organisations, including the news media, which did not appreciate or understand the complexity of practice.

Participants argued that the lack of recognition in news coverage only affected the introductory stages of practice, and this was easily resolved. Furthermore, there was a clear distinction made between broader perceptions of the profession and the micro moments of practice. Although participants felt that news media sometimes undermines their professional identity and self-worth, it did not impact their ability to carry out their work, besides the introductory challenges. In relation to maintaining their professional confidence, participants argued that the small rewards of practice, for example, a grateful client, play a more significant role than the lack of broader recognition. This was understood to be ‘true social work’ and not fully appreciated by individuals who are not in the frontline, and therefore their criticisms are not deemed valid.

The lack of recognition and examples of negative coverage in the news media were used by three participants as a form of reflection that did not undermine their sense of a
professional identity. Instead of causing increased anxiety, media coverage allowed several participants to reflect upon the state of social work and in particular how the media coverage relates to their practice. Participants cited examples of seeing child protection workers in the news being criticised and ‘grilled’ (Participant 5, Interview) for their inadequate note-taking and poor assessment skills. This included child death inquiries where workers were held partly responsible. This resulted in participants reflecting upon their own work and coming away with an increased confidence in not just their skill set, but a broader appreciation for their field and organisation, as evidenced in the quote below:

I’m really proud to be a social worker. I’m really proud of what I do, I know for some people, it frightens people. When I see media coverage I feel saddened for kids that are missed, I understand my limitations and mistakes are made, but we always learn and reflect and get challenged on that. (Participant 17, Interview)

Participants argued that the lack of coverage is most likely to impact recent graduates and those intending on becoming social workers. Although they were not able to cite specific examples, four believed that given the absence of coverage, inexperienced practitioners could possibly have their early anxieties compounded by the lack of general acknowledgement. These findings highlight the intricacy of the impacts where, instead of undermining participants’ confidence in their practice, the idea of negative coverage seemed to reaffirm it, even for those whose practice has been the focus of reporting. The same applies to the lack of recognition as it led participants to identify social work as a great and under-appreciated profession that is misunderstood by the media and the broader society. Confidence once again stemmed primarily from practice, that when discussed in relation to the news media, participants saw as mostly a positive experience.

Only two participants argued that the lack of recognition impacted their practice confidence by increasing their anxiety in relation to the possibility that their work may receive coverage. This was not deemed a significant factor in their general practice but was more in relation to protective cases that may be of interest to journalists. As noted previously, one participant questioned their decision-making by querying how this would look on the front of a newspaper. The increase in anxiety ultimately did not impact their decision-making as
much as the larger organisational response. Media coverage was deemed to induce anxiety due the organisation’s response and how that would impact their work. As highlighted in the examples discussed previously, participants suggested that media coverage has contributed to organisational cultures of fear that spread across the workplace. The two participants who had identified an increase argued that while it may have made them more cautious in their future assessments, the risk averse form of practice they adopted was due to managerial and organisational pressures. The anxiety was used by participants to scrutinise their work, which led to greater confidence and trust in their decision-making ability.

In relation to their personal confidence, participants identified that the lack of recognition had greater impact on how they would relate to friends and family members in general discussion. Every participant where this was discussed (n = 11) expressed a concern regarding how people would react and therefore would usually choose not to talk about it. This was suggested to be the result of several factors, including confidentiality and the struggle to discuss what social workers experience in casual conversation. The lack of recognition in the news media was identified as a factor that caused participants to avoid discussing their profession due to the fear of possible arguments and negative backlash. This was understood to be occurring because of the association between child protection and possible political and ideological differences, resulting in several participants dismissing questions about their work and avoiding talking about it in any great detail. It also led to participants not disclosing their role as social workers in social situations. Fighting for the recognition of the profession was part of their practice and participants did not wish to extend this activism to Sunday lunch and therefore chose avoidance strategies.

7.3 Identity and self-worth

In exploring how the news media affected their self-worth, participants attempted to make a distinction between how the lack of recognition impacted them at a professional and personal level, although as evidenced by the quote below, the distinction was not easily made:
I think how it’s perceived by the community affects us personally and professionally, it’s hard to identify because you identify with your work and profession so much as a person. How other people see it is something that does make it personal … (Participant 13, Interview)

The effects were deemed far more negative in relation to their personal self-esteem, emphasising the struggle in delineating between their professional and personal identity in practice, and in particular how several participants (n = 7) identified social work as an endeavour requiring both. As Doel (2012) argues, while the literature frequently writes about the importance of the distinction for self-care and ethical reasons, the delineation is rarely a simple binary in the field. The interrelated nature of these two domains was observed by participants in relation to how they experience the lack of broader recognition. Issues of self-worth became central as participants identified themselves as hard-working individuals whose recognition was rarely extended beyond practice circles. This is where the negative effects of the lack of coverage on self-worth became evident as participants did not question their practice but would pose existential questions in relation to the purpose of personally committing so much to a profession whose work is not valued, with one participant stating:

I feel positive about what I do but I don’t see a broader recognition.
There’s a lack of trust in social workers, by the people we work with, the people giving us money and by the broader community … (Participant 1, Interview)

The feelings of low self-worth attributed to poor recognition did not have a significant impact on direct practice, but it was identified as limiting some elements of professional engagement. While participants expressed a great deal of pride and confidence in their skills with clients, this did not necessarily extend to working with other professionals. In engaging with doctors, psychologists or managers, several participants struggled to assert their view given how the lack of recognition impacts negatively on their self-worth. When identifying as a member of this poorly recognised professional community to other professionals, participants questioned their confidence and the value of their opinion. One example resulted in a participant being challenged by a doctor on the use of a new drug to treat
individuals who are overdosing. The doctor viewed its use as culturally irresponsible and encouraging further addiction. The participant argued that identifying as a social worker made her question her professional worth and in doing so undermined her professional confidence. In order to overcome this tension, the participant focused on her direct practice identity and her experience ‘being on the frontline’ (Participant 1, Interview) in contrast to a medical professional who had little experience seeing the daily struggles of addiction. The participant in this case concentrated on the minor moments of practice to increase her sense of a professional identity, confidence and worth, in order to advocate and state her professional opinion with a sense of authority.

Every participant (n = 20) expressed a clear sense of personal and professional frustration that their work, which they identified as being of great social worth, was not valued or understood by the news media and the majority of society. The struggle with the need for recognition became a recurrent theme in most discussions, as demonstrated below:

Where is the value? What about ‘Oh wow! You’re a social worker! Is it wrong for me to expect a bit of that? When I was studying social work I didn’t experience any of that, I felt very well supported I felt on top the world … (Participant 11, Interview)

Several participants identified a tension between being a social worker and the desire to be recognised for their work, experiencing a level of shame in wanting to receive praise. The balance of these opposing ideas was negotiated by arguing that while participants are not ‘… in it for the recognition …’ (Participant 10, Workshop), it is a necessary part of professional practice. Participants argued that social workers are necessarily selfless individuals and therefore not suited for the self-promotion needed in raising public profile. As one participant stated, highlighting the tension, ‘You’ve got to can the humility! That’s our natural (state)’ (Participant 14, Workshop). While participants argued that better promotion and media coverage would increase self-worth, they struggled to overcome the guilt associated with wanting recognition and reconciling this need with how they believed a social worker should be.
7.4 Conclusion

In exploring issues of identity, confidence and worth, the effects of news coverage were suggested by participants to be wide-ranging, including confidence, anxiety, reflection, frustration and the struggle with the need for recognition. Ultimately a distinction was made between the professional and personal identity, although this was not a clear demarcation. Practice confidence was identified as being influenced primarily by the social interaction of direct practice and their belief in the professional project. While the news media might have secondary effects, for example, increased anxiety, it did not undermine their trust and belief in social work. The effects were deemed far more negative in relation to their personal self-esteem, where the lack of reporting did not make participants question their practice but raise deeper and more existential questions in relation to the purpose of personally committing so much to a profession whose great work is not valued or understood by the media and the general population.

The reflection process drew attention to the significance of role clarification and self-identification, which by the conclusion, led to the reconstruction of several participants’ approach to practice. The underlying assumption throughout was that social work was a morally just project, unfairly critiqued or ignored by the news and the broader society. These points and the function they played in the identity formation processes that were occurring will be explored in greater depth in Part Three.

The next chapter focuses on the reconstructed knowledge and approaches to practice, highlighting new opportunities for action as identified by participants in the latter stages of the reflection process.
Chapter 8: Theme 4 – Reconstructed knowledge and practice

8.1 Introduction

The critical reflection process adopted a three-stage framework that attempted to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct participants’ understanding regarding the relationship between the news media and their practice. Throughout the twelve-month period, participants were able to challenge existing assumptions and in several instances develop new forms of knowledge and practice. In the last section of the workshops we engaged in several discussions regarding the main insights from the media analysis and reflection process, and how these may be incorporated into practice. This section engaged participants in an early discussion of the media findings (clearly identifying the absence of coverage and beginning to discover the diversity of the limited reporting) and was shaped by the reconstruction stage of the critical reflection process (Fook & Gardner 2007). This chapter explores the reconstructed approaches to practice and knowledge that resulted from the reflection process as identified by participants. The findings will be presented according to three major themes: practice, knowledge and new opportunities for action.

8.2 Reconstructed approaches to practice

The most significant change in participants’ practice as a result of the research was in relation to the importance of role clarification. This was deemed to be the stage of practice where most of the negative impacts were experienced. The reflection process emphasised for several the significance of role clarification beyond the scope of micro practice. The research process allowed participants to identify the possible assumptions, confusion and negative stereotypes that clients may have and the importance of role clarification in not just creating realistic expectations regarding support, but to also provide education and increased professional awareness. Participants for the most part adopted this as part of their practice given that it was taught as a pivotal component of relationship building. The focus on the need for greater role clarification, as a form of advocacy, was significant as
participants became less passive and far more active by exploring how they could better challenge a situation they experienced as oppressive.

The reflection process highlighted how several had overlooked its significance, or as outlined previously, had stopped identifying as social workers due to the lack of recognition.

One thing I was thinking of, something I may do is explain my role better and maybe ask the person if they’ve got any questions. I do a bit more now because I’m trying to work more reflectively, it’s more about my practice rather than my role. I ask is there anything I’m not doing good enough, is there anything I could be doing better? That reflective transparency stuff, maybe I need to focus a little bit more on explaining what my role is and giving them the opportunity to ask me questions just to clarify my role. Then they can ask me are you the same as a child protection worker, or are you the same as the social worker I saw at the hospital last week. Just to be a bit clearer. I probably skimmed over that but maybe that’s important, to spend a little more time on that ...

(Participant 18, Workshop 1)

As evidenced in the quote above, through the research process, participants reflected upon how clients learn about the profession and how assumptions affect practice. Participants reconstructed their understanding of role clarification as a form of micro professional advocacy. The shift began to change participants’ understanding of the process with a focus towards the education of the general population on the profession through every micro encounter as a way of raising the profession’s profile and capital. This included an acknowledgement of the need for social workers to better understand and articulate what constitutes social work practice. During the workshops, two participants expressed a degree of frustration with having to constantly justify their profession, deeming it a waste of time and potentially demoralising. The follow-up workshop discussion diminished these participants’ sense of isolation and reconstructed individual role clarification as part of a larger and more effective approach for professional advocacy.
Participants also reconstructed their understanding for the need for the interdisciplinary promotion of social work. Continuing on the theme of the significance of micro advocacy, three participants argued that they were going to extend this to co-workers, who as previously argued, are believed not to recognise the professional status and expertise of social work. The approach focused primarily on role clarification through informal conversations, but also on the inclusion of qualifications and membership to the association in correspondence. One participant extended this to providing co-workers with formal professional education and notifying team members of special social work dates, for example, World Social Work Day, and other achievements. The focus here was once again on being more proactive.

The AASW became a major theme in participants’ reconstructed approach to practice. In discussing the general state of the profession, participants expressed a high degree of frustration with the association, but this was followed by a degree of guilt given their lack of membership (n = 16) or limited involvement. Throughout the research process, and once establishing that social work was absent from the news media, participants struggled with their role in the process of macro advocacy. While they held the organisation responsible, in many instances they were unsure as to how to support it in their work and whether engaging with the media was the responsibility of the association. Participants made sense of this by identifying the organisation as being responsible for this promotion and that the daily struggles of direct practice leave little room for further work. Participants who were members of the association expressed a frustration with the internal machinations and expressed a deep sense of disillusionment. One participant identified that, as a direct result of the research process, by its conclusion they had become a more active member of the AASW:

For me being part of this research has changed a lot for me, just having an opportunity to reflect on all of this and what that means to me professionally and personally. For me it was when I was talking to you, I have tried to become actively involved with the AASW and my reason for that, firstly I’m not that confident in what they’re doing and I’d like to be a part of changing that, and second of all I’d like to reconnect with workers in a professional context. (Participant 11, Workshop 2)
The significance of the above statement will be explored in greater depth in Part Three of this thesis examining the importance of the research process itself for participants’ identity formation and reality maintenance.

Throughout the twelve-month period, one participant reported that the research process had been a motivator to become an active member of the AASW, only to be later disillusioned by the internal chaos. The difficulty was identified in the conflicting interest and internal professional tensions that undermine decision-making within the organisation, leading to inaction. This was especially pertinent in relation to the need for registration, which, as will be argued in the following section, was deemed by all participants (n = 20) to be the single act that can have the greatest impact on the professional status of social work. The frustration did not detract from the participant continuing working with the association. This was one example where participants reconstructed their practice beyond the scope of direct work and focused on macro professional advocacy.

8.3 Reconstructed understandings of social work and the news media

The reflection process resulted in a substantial shift in participants’ understanding regarding how social work is portrayed in the media:

Since I’ve been involved I’ve been looking at newspaper articles and I’ve been so struck by the absence of anything really relevant about social work, just compared to other professions ... even with psychologists or nurses or doctors I feel that there’s much more media coverage of them ... and teachers, absolutely. One of the biggest issues that I have is whenever social work is covered, a lot of times when I’ve seen it covered in the newspaper people use the term social work but it’s not necessarily referring to what we know as being an actual social worker, like you were saying before there’s that connection between social worker and Child Protection and perhaps in the UK to be a Child Protection practitioner you have to be a social worker, here you don’t have that, and there are
plenty of social workers who aren’t CP practitioners ... that’s so limiting ...

(Participant 11, Workshop 2)

Participants (n = 20) began the research with the assumption that coverage would be negative and linked to child protection practices, mirroring the main arguments and assumptions in the literature. The reflection journal, with its focus on observing news media over the initial three-month period, began to highlight the absence of coverage, and the lack of direct association between protective services and social work in Victoria. In discussing the journal findings, participants were surprised by the absence of coverage and the variety in the existing reporting. Two participants suggested that the lack of reporting may have been due to the analysis occurring during a period of time when social work was not at the centre of a child protection controversy. This point was raised during workshop discussions, and while acknowledging that it may have been a ‘quiet year’ for social work, several participants argued that there were several child protection cases in Victoria during this time, but that social work was not really mentioned in relation to them. Furthermore, as early as the initial three-month analysis, participants became concerned over the lack of social work contribution to news stories. This was in relation to social issues that were deemed to be the domain of the profession, including asylum seekers and family violence. At the conclusion of the process, participants’ media analysis led to them reconstructing their understanding of the relationship between social work and the news media from being unfairly critical to it being mainly absent but far less negative than assumed. Although a significant change, it did not dramatically alter participants’ relationship with the news media as it continued to not appreciate social work.

The absence in the news media shifted several (n = 12) participants’ understanding of the broader recognition of the profession. While in their daily practice experience they felt a degree of association with historical child removal practices, and the general confusion, the media analysis highlighted the absence from broader professional discourses. This presented a dire picture in regard to the professional standing and future avenues for action and self-advocacy. The media further compounded participants’ beliefs that the profession was unappreciated and misunderstood by the broader community and oversimplified in both skills and areas of expertise. The perceived indifference and confusion regarding the profession was a difficult transition for many as they struggled with the notion that the
profession could be losing its professional status and relevance. The achievements of their micro practice seemed to not translate to the broader community and for all participants this inspired the need for further action. The news media was criticised for not understanding the complexity of social work practice by either not reporting it or doing it incorrectly. It was argued that this has resulted in the profession being absent from broader professional discourses that limit the profession’s access to opportunities and resources. Participants suggested that the lack of jobs that are identified specifically as social work is in part due to this lack of general awareness. Furthermore, participants experienced resourcing limitations, including social work funding being used to employ other professionals. The reflection process highlighted larger issues beyond media coverage, including the contested professional standing of social work, general confusion and lack of awareness from the broader population.

The reconstruction in knowledge did not occur for all the participants, with three stating that it simply reaffirmed their experience and assumptions. The three participants had experience with lack of media coverage of their practice, were already active with the AASW, and expressed a level of disillusionment with the profession as a whole even before taking part in the research. Also, for participants who worked for large, medical and multidisciplinary organisations, the invisibility and confusion of social work’s role was a daily experience. Of note was one participant who, at the conclusion of the twelve-month process, argued that her assumption that social work always received negative coverage was based partly on the responsibility she feels when issues of social injustice are reported:

I had a bit more of a think about this, I get a bit more of a sense that it’s an internal thing. An internal sense that people perceive we are doing a bad job because media are doing sad stories about sad social issues, or individual stories about sad social issues... *(Participant 1, Workshop 1)*

The participant’s own media analysis supported the absence previously argued and also reflected upon her reactions of reporting in order to understand the discrepancy between what she believed and experienced. The participant came to the conclusion that as a social worker she is part of a larger professional project that seeks to challenge social injustice and oppression, and therefore any time these issues are highlighted in the media, she feels a
degree of responsibility that it is failing in its core purpose. The disillusionment was also represented in the low numbers of social workers contributing to public debate, highlighting the struggles that she believes the profession faces. This was expressed to represent a disparity between the ideals and practical reality of practice.

By the end of the process, and as a final comment, one participant reflected on a key contradiction in her account, which was present for almost all the participants, and will be the focus of the next section. While participants accused the news media and the broader society for not understanding the complexity of social work, the participant observed that social workers too have historically struggled to define the profession.

Social work itself needs to know what it’s on about, and there are some huge differences between social workers and how they view it, and how they actually practice, depending on their field. How do you portray something that is so diverse? (Participant 13, Workshop 3)

The participant raised the point that maybe the news media faces the same definitional struggles that she faced during the interviews when attempting to define the profession. The reflection did not extend beyond a final statement and therefore there was no time for elaboration. As will be detailed in Part Three, this idea contributed greatly to the theory development section of this study exploring the contradictions in participants’ accounts that are argued to be evidence of substantial shifts in subject positioning.

8.4 Identification of new opportunities for action

As a result of the reflection process, and in particular the workshop discussion, participants recognised new opportunities for action, or in some instances highlighted the significance of existing campaigns. In discussing ways of resisting and dealing with this situation, participants focused on the significance of professional registration. As written previously, as opposed to the UK, Canada and the USA, social work in Australia is not a registered profession (Morley et al. 2013). Over the past several years the AASW has been campaigning to receive statutory regulation with the National Registration and Accreditation Scheme (NRAS) for health professionals, but has so far been unsuccessful. As
with other countries, the statutory model provides an enforceable set of practice standards and professional competencies, as well as a complaints investigation process (Morley et al. 2013), but has been criticised for attempting the difficult and potentially limiting task of setting a practice standard for such a diverse and broad profession (Chenoweth & McAuliffe 2011). Participants did not identify the contradictions in their accounts between celebrating the profession as diverse and broad, and the limiting aspects of professional registration.

The media coverage, or lack thereof, and the impacts on trust were seen to be representative of broader professional issues that social work was experiencing. The importance of registration was emphasised by the fact that the profession did not have exclusive ownership over the title, nor was membership to any governing body a requirement. Participants expressed a sense of dismay that in the struggle for professional recognition, the profession is not able to claim ownership over even basic naming rights. Micro advocacy was deemed insignificant if the profession was not recognised at a statutory level. Participants placed the responsibility of registration primarily within two organisations: the AASW and universities. They identified that these issues are beyond the scope and even energy of direct practitioners and therefore it is the responsibility of those in the association and academics to engage in this task. Participants who were not members felt they were in a paradox as they were supportive of the AASW, but were unwilling to join given the high cost and perceived incompetence. If registration were to be achieved, this would be deemed evidence of the association’s efficacy and a reason to join, although participants understood that without members, the association would struggle to fund advocacy campaigns.

I don’t know, they do have an important role. I feel a bit hypocritical because I’m not actually active with them. I think that membership should be compulsory we need to unite and be more invested in what they do and support us as a profession ... I do value them but I feel hypocritical because I’m not a member. (Participant 6, Interview)

Of note was the repeated mention that academics need to have a higher public profile in advocating for the profession and contributing to public issues. This conclusion was arrived at primarily during the workshops’ media analysis discussion, where academics were
identified as being the most prevalent group of social workers cited for comment. The belief is that while registration is clearly the AASW’s responsibility, academics with their written and verbal abilities are well suited to advocate for registration and raise the profile of the profession, although there was no recognition that it is amongst social work academics where registration is most opposed. This also included a suggestion that the social work curriculum needs to better include media theory, as has been recommended by several authors throughout the years, including Berkovic (1990). As a central tool for communication and advocacy, social workers believed that their education did not sufficiently focus on its use as an instrument of practice.

Participants’ experience with the critical reflection process also highlighted the need for a space in which social workers could discuss the state of their practice and profession. Four participants identified research as a possible avenue to address these feelings of professional isolation given their experience with the reflection process. Although previously dismissed as the domain of academia, participants reconstructed social work research as a collaborative process that provided them with a link to a broader sense of social work, which they felt isolated from. Therefore, the continued engagement with research was identified as a new opportunity for action.

8.5 Conclusion

The critical reflection process supported participants in deconstructing and reconstructing their knowledge in regard to the relationship between social work and the news media. Three major themes were identified in participants’ reconstructed knowledge in relation to: practice, by focusing on the importance of role clarification and better articulating what is social work; the absence of coverage, by focusing on the lack of critical reporting and the impacts the absence has on social work’s professional status; and the identification of new opportunities for action, emphasising the need for registration and further involvement with research. For most, the process yielded new insights, challenging their assumptions.

The broad aim for the reconstruction stage was to develop a new discourse that embodies a different set of power relations, one in which the practitioners recognised actions they could take in their particular contexts rather than feeling powerless to do so. Throughout
the process the focus appeared to be largely on actions that others (including the media, AASW and universities) needed to take and in which they may have little part. Given the time-limited nature of the process, as a researcher I pondered to what extent the main insights from the workshops were only a prelude to what potentially may have occurred had the process been more prolonged. The theory development work detailed in Part Three of this thesis is seen in part as an extension of the reconstruction process, foreshadowed by the deeper reflections starting to surface for participants regarding the internal conflicts and definitional struggles of social work. The theory development work of Part Three continues the reconstruction work of practitioners, further developing their ideas and presenting a new discourse offering very different possibilities in their understanding and acting.

The final section of Part Two provides a reflexive account of the critical reflection process, including my role as a researcher, the shifts in my own assumptions, and my influence on the knowledge creation processes.
Part Two: Reflexive analysis – Identity formation and deconstructing assumptions

The research process highlighted for me many of the challenges faced by researchers, not only in the practical elements of coordinating a longitudinal study, but also managing the role and influence of being positioned as a social work academic. Through the twelve-month process, my reflection journal and supervisor discussions focused on two central themes: my newly formed identity as a social work academic, and my own shifts in assumptions. This section explores the aforementioned themes in the context of the critical reflection process. This will include a discussion of the authority, status and influence that being a social work academic brought and how my own understandings of the relationship between social work and the news media shifted throughout the process.

My initial plan, as a newly appointed social work researcher, was to develop an egalitarian relationship with participants in what was a somewhat misguided understanding of participatory research. I can reflect that in doing so I was to some extent drawing uncritically upon social work values and ideals. The research and reflexive process highlighted, as Jorgensen & Phillips (2002) argue, that very few methods can actually meet an acceptable standard of egalitarian practice, as unless the document is co-written, the thesis is ultimately the interpretation of a single author. As a practitioner, my idea was to work with my colleagues in exploring this topic in a manner that was inclusive and collaborative, but ultimately guided by my framework. The initial interviews highlighted the tension, as the academic nature of the research positioned me as an expert on the topic for participants, undermining any egalitarian ideals. Despite attempts to make the research an informal encounter, I was confronted by the continuing need for affirmation from participants who wanted to know if their answers were correct or were what I was expecting. The situated encounter positioned me as the academic expert giving my statements an authority, which given my nascent academic status, I did not feel was necessarily warranted.

As written previously, the idea was to research a culture that I am part of, but despite my attempts, it became clear that I was identified as belonging to the subculture of social workers who pursue a career in academia. This was a concern given the tensions that exist
within the professional community and the negative connotation that this transition could have for direct practitioners (Webber & Carr 2014). The fact that I continued with direct practice throughout the entire reflection process appeared to reconcile some of these tensions, as I was seemingly positioned, at least partly within a practice domain, and therefore I shared that experience with participants.

The main concern that arose was that in my positioning as an academic, the discussion would be based on attempting to appease whatever larger argument I was attempting to make. Through discussions with my supervisors, several strategies were put in place, including the method triangulation, attrition strategies and smaller devices like providing the questions in advance to diminish the negative effects and give participants time and several opportunities to reflect on their answers. The significance of my authority as an academic was evident during the presentation of the media findings. Although the intent was to explore the news media as co-researchers, the more academic nature of my analysis versus the more experiential elements of theirs, gave my findings stronger argumentative status. The ongoing identification of these issues allowed my research practice to be modified by openly acknowledging the academic nature of the study and also drawing upon my own social work practice skills, including clarification and paraphrasing, to minimise some of the oppressive impacts. My egalitarian ideals were deeply challenged, and drawing upon my developing knowledge and identity as an academic, the research was reconstructed to be understood as a collaborative project whose final document is the interpretation and analysis of a single author.

Another central theme in my journal was the shift in my own assumptions on the coverage of social work, which mirrored some of the experiences of participants. I began the research with the intent of exploring the impacts of negative reporting as a way of advocating for the profession. The question initially did not seem to be whether there would be negative coverage, but just how much. The motivation for doing the research was to better understand the extent of the problem in order to overcome the oppressive barriers that were not allowing the profession to fulfil its social justice mission. The media analysis and continued engagement with the literature began to deconstruct this view and highlighted the existence of a dominant assumption about the relationship within the professional community. It was upon reflection of my journey as a researcher that I realised that in the
earlier stages of the research I was mainly positioned within an uncritical view of the profession. The idea of developing a research project that ‘stood up’ for social work seemed to provide a clear moral narrative from which to position myself as a researcher. The idea of social work as a force for good also provided a degree of stability, although highly problematic, that seemed to reconcile a lot of my insecurities and uncertainties in undertaking such a major research project. As the research progressed, I began to develop a more nuanced understanding of the profession, as evidenced throughout this study, fully engaging with its tension and contradictions.

At the conclusion of the twelve-month research project I had the opportunity to pause and reflect on all that had occurred. After a much needed break, I began listening back to the audio and reading some of the early transcripts to get a better sense of the wealth of information. As I became immersed in the data, the findings in relation to coverage and the specific impacts took a secondary focus to some of the deeper processes that I began to identify in my analysis. In particular, given that the findings did not reflect the dominant discourse, there also seemed to be a striking difference between how participants spoke about social work in general and in relation to the news media. This was further cemented by the discovery that almost every participant seemed to be very critical of the news media for not being able to define social work, and then when given the opportunity they struggled with this themselves. After several discussions with my supervisors it was determined that this had the potential to provide major insights and required further analysis. Part Three documents and explores how this initial insight developed into the central argument of this thesis.
Part Two: Conclusion

Part Two of this thesis presented the main findings from the critical reflection process and media analysis that focused on: the absence of news media’s coverage of the profession; the impacts on practice; the effects on identity, self-confidence and self-worth; and the reconstruction of knowledge and practice.

The main findings from the critical reflection research project and media analysis did not reflect the dominant assumptions regarding news coverage and its impacts. The twelve-month critical reflection process with the twenty social workers resulted in an alternate understanding of the relationship, which included several unique insights characterised by the central idea that coverage was relatively absent and not unfairly critical as assumed. This reflected the findings from the researcher-led media analysis, which also argued that although social work coverage was lower than comparable professions, the existing reporting constructed the profession as being highly diverse in both fields of practice and demographics. Participants’ reflection on the relationship between news media and practice was shaped by this discovery and led to several insights of relevance to the research question and aims. For most, the detrimental impacts did not extend beyond the early engagement stages of direct practice and were easily addressed. Also, personal experience was deemed to be a far more significant factor in shaping how clients understand social work beyond anything they see or read.

A major discovery for participants during the process was that the lack of client trust stemmed not necessarily from the assumption that they are child protection workers, but that the lack of coverage leads to clients and co-workers’ questioning of their professional ability. Participants identified the absence as being representative of the low professional status that social work holds. Receiving media coverage of individual practice was reported as being a challenging experience, but whose impacts were not long-lasting. The more destructive elements were the organisational responses to news reporting that created a toxic work culture of anxiety, risk aversion and recrimination. In exploring issues of identity, confidence and worth, the effects of coverage were suggested by participants to be wide-ranging but were all underscored by a clear frustration that the news does not understand...
social work. By the conclusion of the process the majority of participants had redeveloped their practice by focusing more on the role that they can play in raising the profile of the profession. The reflection process highlighted for most participants the limited impacts on daily practice, but identified larger issues regarding social work’s deprofessionalisation, general confusion and its low professional status.

As the findings did not reflect dominant assumptions entrenched within the professional narrative, this prompted major questions that were the central focus of the latter stages of my analysis. Mainly, can we better understand the dominance of these views through the function that they serve for social workers? Central to this was the discovery of how participants used the news media and the ideas about negative coverage to make sense of their own profession and identity, which will be the focus of Part Three.
Part Three: The news media and social workers’ professional identity
Part Three: Introduction

While the critical reflection process and media analysis findings detailed in Part Two are of interest and importance in their own right, the most significant discovery was underscored by the dissonance between what social workers assumed and what they observed throughout the study. This discord is argued to be evidence of the possible existence of an entrenched and taken-for-granted discourse about social work’s negative news coverage operating within certain sectors of the social work professional community. In order to better understand the dominance of these possibly unsubstantiated beliefs (and drawing upon the social constructionist underpinnings), the focus then centred on exploring the function that these ideas had for participants’ meaning making processes and sense of self. The research used Alvesson & Karreman’s (2007, 2011) framework for theory development as a way of analysing the research project data in an exploratory and inductive manner, with a particular focus on the subject positioning and identity formation of workers. In using the framework, it became apparent that the relationship between social work and the news media can be better understood by examining the effects that dominant beliefs about reporting have on the formation of social workers’ professional identity.

From the initial stages of the research exploring ‘what is social work?’ it was clear that participants’ experience of social workers’ professional identity was precarious, contradictory and contested, with numerous elements shaping it and at odds with each other. The tension, primarily between what they think social work should be and what they do, resulted in a fragile and antagonistic positioning. As shown in Figure 6 (p. 206), this tension was resolved, momentarily and problematically, when the focus was on negative news coverage. When the discussion focused on unfair reporting, participants did not acknowledge the struggles that they faced and adopted a seemingly more stable sense of the professional identity with all the different components no longer at odds with each other but in unison and under attack.

It is theorised that these entrenched views about negative reporting play a significant function in negotiating and mediating the high degree of tension and conflict experienced by workers in contemporary social work practice.
Participants formed a fraught and momentarily ‘clear and stable’ professional identity in relation to the news media. This was achieved in part through the use of ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies, which while traditionally psychoanalytic concepts; they have been further developed by constructionist researchers and redeveloped from their essentialist origins to be understood as strategies that individuals use to form or maintain subject positions (Gough, McFadden & McDonald 2013; Jensen 2011; Krummer-Nuevo 2002; Krummer-Nuevo & Sidi 2012). The use of these projection strategies positioned them within a unified, clearly defined and morally just professional group that is unappreciated, unfairly critiqued and misunderstood by the news media, along with the broader society (see Position B in Figure 6, p. 206). The reactive ‘clear and stable’ professional identity adopted by participants was fraught and precarious. This is identified as being problematic because as the research process highlighted: it momentarily constructed social work as a unified group within an acontextual and uncritical higher moral ground; it did not reflect what this and other studies have found regarding coverage; and ultimately did not engage with, or even acknowledge, the degree of conflict and tension experienced by participants in contemporary practice. Dominant ideas about unfair reporting therefore became a tool with which social workers defused these tensions and temporarily displaced the ensuing dissonance and possible antagonism.

The findings indicate that the profession’s fascination with its news media coverage may come at the expense of better understanding and negotiating the tensions and contradictions of contemporary social work. It is proposed that in order to break the repetitive cycle that has dominated discussion on this topic (characterised in the Australian context by poorly researched claims that the news media is unfairly biased towards social work and suggesting better public relation campaigns as a solution) a major shift in focus is required. This change involves a move away from a defensive and reactionary position (that sees all negative coverage as unfair and does not look beyond social work to understand news creation processes and how other groups experience reporting), towards a more reflective and proactive approach (that is less insular in relation to news media coverage and its impacts, and seeks to balance an awareness of the profession’s public image with better understanding and articulating what constitutes professional social work).
Part Three presents the main theoretical contribution of this thesis. Building on the findings and insights from Part Two, this section explores the role that the dominant ideas about reporting have in the formation of participants’ social work professional identity. Using Alvesson & Karreman’s (2011) framework, Part Three is divided into two chapters covering all the key stages of the theory development process. Chapter 9 will focus on the first three stages (as identified in the methods chapter) that look to identify ‘breakdowns’ in participants’ accounts that may contribute to the development of new theory. This will be done by initially exploring how the research itself was a significant site for identity formation. Then, through the use of interview and workshop data, the chapter will present the ‘breakdowns’ in meaning in participants’ accounts, demonstrating how they are evidence of major shifts in subject positioning. Chapter 10 will draw upon the latter stages of the framework to theorise the significance of the breakdowns and in doing so provide a new interpretation regarding the function that dominant ideas about reporting have in the formation of social workers’ professional identity. This will include discussing how ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies, which while traditionally psychoanalytic concepts they have been further developed by constructionist researchers (Dietz 2011, Jensen 2011, Stenner 1993), were a key element of how participants forged a relationship with the news media. Furthermore, it will highlight why the resulting ‘clear and stable’ identity was deemed problematic.

Part Three will conclude with my continuing reflexive analysis.
Chapter 9:
The news media and social workers’ professional identity

9.1 Introduction

As the findings from the research project did not reflect dominant assumptions identified in the literature review, further analysis was necessary to better understand the significance of this entrenched view. In accordance with the constructionist underpinnings recognising the research process itself as a site of inquiry of great importance (Alvesson & Karreman 2007, 2011; Holstein & Gubrium 2008; Silverman 2005), the focus was on the function that this entrenched belief had for participants as a way of better understanding its dominance. In using the first three stages of Alvesson & Karreman’s (2007, 2011) framework, the analysis revealed that given the degree of tension and fragmentation experienced in daily practice, the research was an important site for identity and reality maintenance. The analysis led to the discovery of major contradictions, or ‘breakdowns’ in meaning, in participants’ accounts when they attempted to define social work and then explore its relationship to the news media. The initial discovery seemed to be the co-existence of two contradictory positions, where on the one hand participants would be very protective of their professional identity in the context of negative reporting, but then on the other, struggle to identify what this constituted when discussed more broadly. These insights were further studied using the aforementioned framework, and this led to the development of the central argument of the thesis that will be explored throughout this and the next chapter.

Chapter 9 will begin by discussing how the research process itself was an important site for identity formation and reality maintenance. Then, through the use of interview and workshop data, the chapter will present the ‘breakdowns’ in meaning in participants’ accounts, demonstrating how these contradictions are evidence of major shifts in subject positioning in relation to participants’ social work identity. While this chapter presents the ‘breakdowns’, Chapter 10 will explore and discuss their significance.
9.2 The research process and a fragmented professional identity

Alvesson & Karreman (2011) suggest that while theory development can be seen as one of the more valuable and prestigious elements of the social sciences, it is also regularly absent from empirical research due to its difficulty. The authors attempted to overcome this perceived shortcoming by developing a framework for theory development from qualitative empirical material drawing from Asplund (1970), Poole & Van de Ven (1989) and Abbott’s (2004) work. Their approach encourages critical reflection and seeks to ‘enhance our ability to challenge, refute, refine and illustrate theory’ (Alvesson & Karreman 2011, p. 14). Alvesson & Karreman (2007, 2011) propose a framework that is divided into five stages, written about in the methodology chapter. In line with the framework, the theory development portion began with a specific emphasis on the research process itself.

The first stage in the process is identified as ‘familiarisation’. This required a wide-ranging focus of inquiry and rather than testing a hypothesis, the aim was to explore from a constructionist standpoint ‘What is going on here?’ (Alvesson & Karreman 2011, p. 68). The interview and workshop data was analysed with these ideas in mind. As the research was about social work, the analysis began with a broad focus on exploring how participants understood their own profession. In reading the transcripts, and listening back to the hours of material, it became apparent that for the majority of participants the research process itself was a significant form of reality maintenance for their professional identity (Berger & Luckmann 1966, p. 41; Hunter, Bergesen & Kurzweil 2009). As Berger & Luckmann (1966, p. 41) write: ‘the most important vehicle of reality maintenance is conversation’. Social interaction through verbal communication is claimed by these authors to represent reality maintenance of the subjective reality. Rather than dismissing much of the content of conversations as ‘redundant banalities’, they argue it plays a key function in constructing and maintaining identities and subjectivities. Reality maintenance became a significant process in the research as participants expressed a sense of alienation and fragmented experience of their social work identity (as demonstrated in Position A in Figure 6, p. 206).

In relation to the workplace domain (Position A – Figure 6, p. 206), the majority of participants were not employed specifically as social workers (n = 14) and the ability to identify as such was not commonplace in their daily interactions. This is consistent with
other research, including Cameron’s (2003), where only 36% of participants stated that their job title was social worker. In writing about the deprofessionalisation of social work, Healy (2004) examined census data from 1996 to 2001 to compare workplace trends in the employment of social workers. Healy & Meagher (2004) found that community workers were employed at the highest level (n = 17,101), followed by social workers (n = 9111), and, finally, welfare workers (n = 8987). Even in introductory conversations it was clear that participants for the most part did not frequently engage in discussions about the social work profession as they struggled to define what it constituted and they relied heavily on their university experience and educational domain to find answers.

As the focus of inquiry was initially on the process itself, the research was identified as being a situational encounter of great significance in the maintenance of participants’ social work identity. This became evident through explicit statements in the early part of the interview when discussing ‘What is social work?’ as participants spoke of experiencing a fragmented sense of a professional identity which was compounded by the fact that only six were in jobs that identified them as social workers. Participants expressed a sense of frustration when identifying as a social worker as it was something that ‘doesn’t come across, social work is not a very well understood profession …’ (Participant 16, Interview). Several participants reported feeling a sense of abandonment of their social work identity in their daily role (represented as the tension between workplace and values domains in Figure 6 Position A, p. 206), as exemplified by this quote:

Do you think there’s a disconnect between our profession and our role?
And as social worker how do we remain connected or engaged with our profession if our role is not necessarily social worker? (Participant 11, Workshop 2)

Participant 10 further typifies this fragmentation by discussing workplace struggles to identity as a social worker and the hope that some of this disconnect would be addressed by taking part in the research:
You know I’m not even allowed to use my professional title, I put (the) generic wellbeing professional, I loathe it, and that’s my title I have to use and I argued it, I talked about the importance for my professional identity, everyone that works for us has to, because it’s a very corporate run place, it was a branding thing … I haven’t pushed back harder on these things this is what these discussions have brought up the urgency in myself to fight a little bit more get a little more involved on some level, and you come to these things and ‘Great! I’m going to hang out with some social workers!’ that’s really important to have moments like this. I feel compelled to do something but I’m not sure how. (Participant 10, Workshop 1)

The ability to explore social work within a research context was used by most participants as a way of maintaining their professional identity, highlighting how fragmented and conflicted it had become. Several participants spoke of the feelings of professional belonging experienced at university and the stark contrast once they were in the workplace. Participant 11 spoke about this frustration and the role of the research process:

For me being part of this research has changed a lot for me, just having an opportunity to reflect on all of this and what that means to me professionally and personally, for me it was when I was talking to you … about how devalued I feel in the context of when clients or other workers don’t understand my profession and how I remembered at university and being so passionate, passionate and ‘Yeah!’ … working in the context and feeling so undervalued and what I have done as a result. I have tried to become actively involved with the AASW and my reason for that. I’d like to reconnect with workers in a professional context, there aren’t any avenues where, as professionals I can explore that so I wanted another avenue where I could feel connected … that’s just where I’m at, at the moment but being part of this research has really shifted my thinking. (Participant 11, Interview)
Social workers’ sense of fragmentation extended to being able to define the profession, as it appeared to be identified as mainly the domain of academia. Several participants struggled, making references that the questions felt like a university exam, and therefore they required time to reflect and remember a textbook answer. Defining the profession was not an easy task for most participants and clearly detached from their daily practice in an organisational context. Even when they tried, they were confronted by seemingly unresolvable tensions and conflicts, especially in relation to the care/control dichotomy, organisational influence and morally contingent elements of practice that compounded this struggle. The definitional struggles and exam-like environment could have also been influenced by my status as a social work academic and the university setting of eight of the interviews. As demonstrated below, even for recent graduates who could easily draw upon their university experience, the definitions were built around unclear notions of helping:

I should know this being three years out. I guess to me it sits neatly in other helping professions. I identify it as a helping profession which is probably an old-fashioned term for it but I think it probably runs a bit of a fragile, walks on a bit of a tightrope between being a professional profession and a helping profession. *(Participant 7, Interview)*

Taking part in the research was one of the few instances where participants were able to be positioned as professional social workers. The fact that defining social work seemed to be strongly associated with their education could suggest that further developing participants’ understanding of the profession was not an issue of daily concern, and possibly has not been since graduation, given the lack of relevance to their practice.

The next section of this chapter will continue to explore the fragmented identity and present the main insights from the analysis of the data, focusing primarily on how the ‘breakdowns’ were identified and revealed significant shifts in participant’s subject positioning that formed the basis for the central argument of this study.
9.3 Finding the ‘breakdown’

The ‘familiarisation’ process led to the identification of a significant link between the research process and participants’ professional identity. Using the framework, the next two stages of analysis sought to build on these ideas by focusing on issues related to professional identity, looking specifically for ‘breakdowns’ in meaning that may be of theoretical interest (Alvesson & Karreman 2007, 2011). Alvesson & Karreman (2007, 2011) propose that contradictions in participants’ accounts could be representative of larger processes and if they are unable to be explained through existing theory, can greatly contribute to the development of new theory. In reviewing the data, with these ideas in mind, it became apparent that there seemed to be a major breakdown in meaning in almost every participant’s account (n = 18).

In reading the transcripts and listening back to the interviews and workshops, a significant inconsistency seemed to be present when social workers discussed the profession generally and then in relation to the news media. The vast majority of participants initially struggled to define social work or would construct it as a broad profession around general ideas of helping and caring. In attempting to define social work beyond aspirational ideals, participants also highlighted the seemingly contradictory construction of social work around its care/control functions, the larger role that organisational factors have in shaping how they practice and the contingent elements of professional values (see Figure 6 Position A, p. 206). The breakdown occurred when this was compared to how participants discussed the profession in relation to the news media. Participants shifted their positioning (see Figure 6 – Position B, p. 206) from a highly conflicted construction of the profession, when discussed in general, to a clear and stable one in the context of the news media.

The next section of this chapter will draw upon positioning theory (Burr 2004; Davies & Harré 1990; Jensen 2011; Stenner 1993; Tuffin 2005) and through the use of examples from the interview and workshop data will demonstrate how these contradictions represent major shifts in participants’ subject position throughout the research process.
9.4 Shifting subject positions: Position A – a contradictory and contested social work

As part of the critical reflection interviews, participants initially explored their understanding of the profession. This included their role, field of practice and also discussed the current state of the profession in Australia. While participants knew the study was about the relationship between social work and the news media, this section did not involve any explicit discussion about this topic. While defining their profession could be expected to be a relatively easy task, almost all of the participants struggled, as identified previously and evidenced by the next quote:

Whenever I try and explain what social work is I think I throw around a lot of words I’ll say social justice, human rights, I guess working with people to support them to get their best quality of life or to get through life crisis or life experiences where they might need support to do that and doing that in a human rights and social justice framework, but then in saying that social work to me is confusing as well, part of it is social work with individuals where you’re working one on one with people and you have different theories and different ways you might work with people and
move right up into the spectrum of doing broader policy and program development and advocacy and the political realm of things ... so I think to me it feels complex even being in the profession and having to explain that to people. (Participant 1, Interview)

In defining social work, participants positioned their identity within a discursive construction of the profession that understood it as complex, contradictory and contested. This was aligned with a constructionist understanding of identity formation and maintenance identified earlier (Payne 2005; Weinberg 2014). The identity struggles experienced by participants are reflected in the work of constructionist theorists’ analysis of the social work identity (Weinberg 2014). Payne (2005, 2014) argues that in relation to social workers’ professional identity ‘social construction ideas suggest professional identity is complex, ambiguous and constantly changing. Therefore, professional identities are likely to emerge within a range of settings, each contributing its own conception of the profession to a more generalized whole, rather than being defined by an established globally or generally defined professional role: bottom-up rather than top-down’ (Payne 2005, p. 17). This is exemplified in the quote below as a participant reflected on the possibility of developing a macro definition for the profession:

That’s the thing about social work, it’s hard to define and that can be quite challenging I think the AASW tries to look at things in a big picture kind of way certainly there’s the Victoria branch and they try and explore issues that affect social workers across all of those areas but again we don’t have registration we don’t have mandatory professional membership so I think the AASW is quite dominated by social workers working in the health sector and in the government sector I don’t think that even reflects accurately how broad social work is. (Participant 2, Interview)

Participants found it challenging to provide a macro definition for their profession and looked at the plurality, complexity and ambiguities challenging the modernist concept of there being a ‘truth’ about social work. There was a clear tension in most participants’
accounts relating to the purpose of social work and the contextual and morally contingent nature of practice. The following quote typifies this position:

I think social work as has been shown over the years is often subject to the trends and beliefs of the day and you go back to all the stuff that’s come out in the last year about forced adoption and things and social workers were part of this, but it was part of the thinking of the day.

(Participant 15, Interview)

When asked about the social function of the profession in the initial stages of the research, the majority of participants began by stating the core principles of human rights and social justice. When prompted further most were unable to articulate what these principles constituted or how they reflect their daily practice experiences. Participants for the most part began the question with celebrating social work as an under-appreciated force for ‘good’ that is the embodiment of social justice. As exemplified in the quote below:

Social work is about empowering people to be able to help themselves with things that they’re struggling with, it’s about fighting inequalities and it’s about social justice really it’s about empowering people to empower themselves ...

(Participant 12, Interview)

But when prompted further about what constitutes empowerment and social justice, the participant struggled to provide any further clarity.

Some people get it some people don’t, it’s about human rights and what’s right.

(Participant 12, Interview)

When follow-up questions were asked to clarify these concepts, including social justice, most participants identified this as meaning ‘helping’, ‘a fair go’ and ‘caring’, but generally did not elaborate beyond that. Participants expressed a degree of pride in their chosen profession, but once these aspirational values were identified, specific examples of how
they are applied emphasised the complexities of practice. Participants also struggled with the possible coexistence of both control and care functions in their practice, especially in relation to protective practices. Constructing social work around the co-existence of these seemingly contradictory functions presented serious challenges for participants in forming a professional identity. For example, the majority of participants spoke of the tension between social control and social care within the context of social justice:

Social work is working on facilitating and assisting people to reach their potential and having the same access that all that life has to offer and that everyone else around them can access. I think social work sometimes it can become very direct service individual client … the social function of social work as much as I don’t agree or like it can be to actually keep, to have some sort of people behaving in a certain way.

(Participant 4, Interview)

The above quote summarises what most participants expressed to be a recurrent dissonance between the values they held as professionals and how this translated into their workplace and roles, especially in relation to the control elements. Participants for the most part did not wish to explore the social control issues for a great deal of time, as it appeared to be a very unstable and defeatist position from which to form a professional identity. The significance of this is that it began to highlight the identity formation challenges for participants. While most participants engaged with these ideas to some degree, several attempted to balance these potentially paralysing impacts, questioning the point of all moral professional action if it will eventually be wrong in hindsight, with a focus on the more tangible and practical elements of their direct practice.

For participants, discussing the form and function of the profession resulted in an unclear, unstable and contested identity. Several (n = 9) resisted this definition by reaffirming their identity as workers within organisational settings instead of a broader conception of their role as social workers. This process reflects Payne’s (2005, 2014) work on the contemporary identity formation struggles experienced by social workers. The tensions, ambiguities and contradictions of contemporary practice, especially the tension between the workplace and values domains (see Figure 7 p. 215), were difficult for most participants to manage as it
undermined their understanding of the profession’s ideals. This represented a major contradiction between who they thought they were trained to be (liberators of the oppressed and carers of the underprivileged) and who they are in their workplace (bureaucrats supporting the management of risk and agents of social control), mirroring some of Hindmarsh’s (1993) research findings on the topic. In order to manage this tension, the focus for some became the daily successes and the small rewards of practice:

Sometimes you feel like you’re the hamster in the wheel, our job as social workers has become more and more paperwork, having to tick boxes and fill out forms, but then you have these moments when you’re doing something and you go ‘This is it! Yay!’ This is what I want to be doing. Those moments I kind of try and hold onto them, and yep that’s it that stuff. Also sometimes it’s not even something you’re doing, it’s something the carer will ring you and tell you hey this happened … so I didn’t do it, but I supported someone else in having sort of a moment. (Participant 16, Interview)

This proved to be a reaffirming and positive strategy where the larger complexities and contradictions of being a social worker were given less significance to the micro moments of practice. Focusing on the small moments allowed participants to form an identity around the more concrete elements of their daily practice experience within the workplace domains.

There was also a high degree of conflict for participants about the use of the professional title ‘social work’. Defining social work led to every participant initially identifying it as an exclusively tertiary qualification and disregarded anyone who would carry out a similar role but not hold a degree. This was continually reaffirmed as a key trait of their professional identity and one that is seen to be constantly undermined in their workplace. In asserting that social work is exclusively a university qualification, participants constructed their professional status around one of education and status, rather than personal values or life experience. While qualifications became a central point throughout most of the interviews and workshops, they were not a pre-planned point for discussion. During a section of the interview there was a broad sub-question that looked to explore ‘who are social workers?’
The intent was to discuss a wide range of points including age, gender, background and personal traits, but focused significantly on education and who has the right to call themselves as such. Participants frequently utilised this strategy as a way of reaffirming their status as professionals, something not experienced in their daily practice. The need for tertiary education was argued for strongly, despite struggling to articulate what the training actually gave them. As evidenced by the quote below, several participants said that those without the necessary training are potentially placing clients at risk, highlighting the expertise required to practice:

I know that sometimes there are people that call themselves social workers that may have just a certificate in something but for me doing some kind of university qualification that has social work in the title, I worked hard to become a social worker and there are certain levels of professionalism and things that we strive to achieve as a profession and if there’s people calling themselves social workers who haven’t got the training and don’t have the knowledge and the skills then that could be a bit of a danger, I guess I’d be concerned. I think if they’re telling a client that they’re a social worker and they’re not then there’s an expectation of what you could expect from that person and if they don’t have the same values and sit within the code of conduct and that sort of thing.

(Participant 6, Interview)

The increased focus on university training during the process allowed participants the opportunity to identify as a tertiary educated social worker within a space that fully recognised them as such. The incessant focus on social work not being recognised as a tertiary skill was done uncritically, as participants celebrated the academic nature of social work, yet struggled to identify what this constitutes or how it contributes to their skills set. As typified in the quote below, this included a contradiction in the stated importance of theories to inform practice, and the proceeding exploration that yielded a perfunctory list of concepts:
Education gives you the theories to back up the values and beliefs you already have. So strength-based approaches and narrative therapy I guess would be, I hate theories, no I don’t hate theories let me take that back, strengths-based is what I would use, there’s systems theory, whose class am I thinking of? Ecological theory, is that the right word? (Participant 12, Interview)

In asserting the exclusivity of the professional title, several participants shared instances when this belief was challenged as certain groups, for example, Indigenous Australians, may use the term ‘social work’ to refer to non-tertiary qualified individuals. As evidenced by the quote below, when identifying what constitutes social work education, several participants were contradicting themselves by being dismissive of both personal competencies and academic competencies. This also presented an intra-professional struggle about what level of tertiary education is required as several were dismissive of either the qualifying master’s degree, for being too short, or the bachelors for not providing a postgraduate level of education.

I believe to be a social worker you have to have a degree in social work. I realise that that definition excludes Indigenous who are social workers, if you don’t have a rule, baseline to what constitutes a social worker even if you’re trying to include people without higher education, I just think you’re not on the same page, I’ve met many people who call themselves social workers but they don’t think like me a common ground through having a degree in social work, at least an undergraduate degree is needed, I’d like to see the bar be lifted higher. Having a degree it teaches you something that you just can’t learn from picking up some books and reading. (Participant 11, Interview)

There was also a contradiction between the exclusionary language used to define social work as purely a tertiary qualified profession and the construction of the profession around egalitarian values. This could be represented as a tension between the egalitarian ideals in the values domain and the professional standards of the educational domain (see Figure 7 p. 215). Participants were unable to reconcile the possible disparity between being a
profession whose origins were not academic, the egalitarian values they represent and the need for social work to be recognised as a tertiary profession for legitimacy. Participant 10 exemplifies this struggle as he vehemently defends the status and exclusivity of social work, but then struggles to correct co-workers who may use the title incorrectly but have greater experience in the field.

Social work qualifications, you have to have qualifications, otherwise we are never going to push for the legitimacy of our profession ... (education gives you) the theoretical frameworks and the right to practice. I mean I’m not saying there’s other people who do social work stuff who do not have the right to practice, I think it gives you the right to call yourself a social worker. I think it’s so important. In a family support unity I was working, I respected these workers greatly, they were working for twenty years in family support and refer to themselves as social workers. I didn’t want to be rude (in correcting the workers) ... in some ways I thought, man you have a right you’ve been working twenty years in the front line, you’ve done twenty years of working in the trenches with all sorts of traumatic situations. I’ve certainly corrected people not in the industry.

(Participant 10, Interview)

As a strategy, positioning social work as a tertiary trained profession drew upon modernist professional discourses, situated mainly within the education and theories and traditions domains, to construct an exclusive group of experts. The contradiction in: advocating for the need for tertiary education, but not being able to identify what this constituted; and then in the latter stages of the interviews reproaching the news media for not recognising social work as a university level profession, began to identify ‘breakdowns’ that informed the theory development work.

While this diverse and contested positioning appeared to sometimes become highly unstable in constructing a professional identity, participants were also able to engage with, or at the very least acknowledge, the profession’s complexity and contradictions within the context of the reflection process, which was in stark contrast to how they were positioned as social workers in relation to the news media.
9.5 Shifting subject positions: Position B – a ‘clear and stable’ social work

Figure 8: Position B – A ‘clear and stable’ social work

The breakdown in meaning occurred when social work was discussed in relation to the news media, primarily but not exclusively in the construction and deconstruction stages of the research process. The major critique from participants was that the news media, along with the broader society (as these words were used interchangeably), does not understand social work and therefore ignores it or does not define it correctly. Participants spoke of the news media overlooking, oversimplifying or ignoring practice, and that this undermined the public’s confidence in their ability. By the end of the reflection process, most participants’ understanding had shifted from coverage being unfairly negative to it being absent. This still perpetuated the belief that the news media does not understand social work, just through indifference rather than animosity. For others, by the reconstruction stage the challenge to the dominant assumption led to initial observations regarding the need for social workers to better understand and articulate what constitutes professional social work practice.

The breakdown was initially identified as a contradiction in assumptions where on the one hand the profession was argued to be very broad, fragmented, contested, contradictory and therefore hard to define, and then the news media (along with the general population) is
critiqued for not being able to define it correctly.

These two quotes below, one utilised earlier, were taken at different stages of the interview and best exemplify the breakdown present for almost every participant. As demonstrated, at first the participant struggles to define social work, and then becomes frustrated by the lack of understanding:

- **What is social work?**

  Whenever I try and explain what social work is I think I throw around a lot of words I’ll say social justice, human rights. I guess working with people to support them to get their best quality of life or to get through life crisis, but then in saying that social work to me is confusing as well, part of it is social work with individuals where you’re working one on one with people and you have different theories and different ways you might work with people and move right up into the spectrum of doing broader policy and program development and advocacy and the political realm of things, so I think to me it feels complex even being in the profession and having to explain that to people. *(Participant 1, Interview)*

- **What is the relationship between news media portrayals of the profession and your practice?**

  I’m frustrated by the lack of understanding of the work, and the lack of understanding of the resources and capacity, I say I’m a social worker and people don’t know what that means. *(Participant 1, Interview)*

This is argued to be evidence of a significant shift in participants’ subject positioning of their social work professional identity. While in the first section of the interview participants were able to somewhat explore the definitional struggles and complexities, once the discussion shifted towards the news media a clear dichotomy was created. Participants, for the most part, except for two who will be discussed later on, did not acknowledge that the same definitional challenges and confusion they discussed earlier on in the interview could also be
experienced by the news media, and the broader population. There appeared to be a 
disconnection from the tension once the news media was discussed as the struggles they 
faced were reconstructed as a form of attack, primarily based around not understanding the 
‘truth’ about social work. As shown in the quote below, even though participants struggled 
with the profession’s social function, historical practices and alignment to the state, once 
discussed in the context of the news media these questions were not acknowledged and 
seemingly dissociated from their own previous statements. This led to several participants 
reproaching the news media and the general public for not being able to understand 
something that they were unable to fully comprehend themselves.

- **What is social work?**

  It’s pretty broad, we have this conflict often of having to balance discipline 
and welfare and I guess there that similar sort of dichotomy in social work 
that you have an element of social control but an element of concern for 
wellbeing. I think social work as has been shown over the years is often 
subject to the trends and beliefs of the day. *(Participant 15, Interview)*

- **What is the relationship between news media portrayals of the profession and your 
  practice?**

  The public image is pretty poor, it’s often negative things that hit the 
headlines or as we discussed people who aren’t social workers, that have few 
boundaries and poor training that are portrayed as social workers, or there’s 
not much at all. People are left perhaps with this sort of real confusion, I find 
people don’t really seem to know what we do. *(Participant 15, Interview)*

The ‘clear and stable’ professional identity adopted by participants in relation to the news 
media constructed social work within an acontextual and uncritical higher moral ground 
that did not acknowledge the tensions experienced by participants. The frustration with the 
news media was divorced from ideas stated earlier in the interview regarding the complex, 
contingent and sometimes ambiguous roles that social workers engage in. Social work 
ceased to be a social construct and was suddenly understood in more positivist terms. There
was now a clear ‘truth’ about social work, with the profession seen as a force for social justice, which is misunderstood and misrepresented by the news media. In adopting this positioning, not only were certain domains displaced (like historical and political context, social work traditions and theories and the workplace context), but the remaining were in harmony, all seemingly in agreement regarding the nature and function of social work, as the tension was displaced towards the news media as an external threat.

The identification of the ‘breakdowns’ and shifts in subject positioning provided the foundations for the theoretical work of this study. These points will continue to be discussed in the next chapter focusing on the highly problematic nature of the ‘clear and stable’ professional identity.

9.6 The exceptions

For those participants for which the shift did not occur (n = 2), it was because they were not self-identifying as social workers in their practice and therefore did not actively do so during the research process. Their interest in the research project was based around the professional development and research skills training that taking part in the process could bring, instead of any specific interest in the outcomes. These two participants communicated a separation from their social work professional identity and therefore did not position themselves within these discourses. While they provided general and stable definition from the start, the focus was more on how their social work identity held little relevance to their practice and therefore they did not identify as belonging to a larger professional group.

In both instances the participants did not identify strongly with their social work professional identity but rather saw it as a degree they needed to fulfil their organisational role, which was the source of their professional identity. In each case, given that they worked in multidisciplinary teams, they expressed concern about being known by a professional title, especially in the context of sexual abuse and community work. The argument proposed is that if workers are all known by their degree, for example, psychologist or youth worker, then certain staff members would be favoured by clients because of their seemingly higher professional status. The participants in this case, while
interested in social work and identifying it as a strong part of their training, did not position their professional identify around their degree, but more so their role:

Throughout my career actually my status as a social worker has kind of ebbed and flowed about how important (in regard to my identity) personally depending on the context and the role that I've been working in at the time. In my current role I rarely think about actually being a social worker at a professional kind of level, because I work in a team where there’s a big group of people performing the same duties with the same goals and often using the same methods and techniques but we come from all sorts of professional backgrounds so there’s very rarely a need to kind of pick out and go what actual training or qualifications do you have? Where when I spent time (in other setting) it was part of the core it was a social work role by title and definition, in good ways and sometimes in not so good ways there was a lot of contrast and comparison in how you sat alongside people from other disciplines.

(Participant 5, Interview)

The significance is that for these two participants, their identity as social workers was no longer relevant and maintaining it did not appear to be of importance. This could be evidence of the long-term consequences of the fragmentation that was occurring with the other participants, as the two participants who were the exceptions seemed to have come to the conclusion that being a social worker holds little value to their daily work. This also confirms the importance of reality maintenance in maintaining a professional identity. Ultimately they chose to focus on their organisational role almost exclusively when positioning themselves as professionals, as it provided a clearer and less fragmented sense of identity.

9.7 Conclusion

Applying the first three stages of Alvesson & Karreman’s (2011) framework identified the research itself as an important site for identity formation and reality maintenance. This led to the discovery of significant ‘breakdowns’ in participants’ accounts as they explored the
relationship between social work and the news media. The analysis revealed that throughout the research process, participants formed their professional identity within two alternating and contradictory subject positions. For almost every participant, when social work was discussed in general, the profession was deemed broad, ambiguous and hard to define, but when discussed in the context of the news media, these struggles were not present and most reproached the news media for not being able to understand or define social work correctly. As it has been demonstrated, this contradiction represents substantial shifts in participants’ subject positioning as social workers from a tension-filled, contradictory and fragmented construction of social work that reflects what participants experience in daily practice, to a morally clear, unified and stable one when the focus is on the existence of unfairly negative news coverage. This discovery underscored the major theoretical contribution of this study in relation to the negotiating function of the dominant and entrenched discourse within the professional narrative about negative coverage, which will be the focus of the next chapter.

The next chapter draws upon the final two stages of the theory development framework and discusses how this contradiction contributed to the development of new ideas regarding the relationship between social workers and the news media. This will focus on presenting: the main theoretical argument of this study, how ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies were a key process in regard to how participants formed their professional identity in relation to the news media, and the highly problematic nature of the resulting ‘clear and stable’ identity.
Chapter 10:
Problematising social workers’ professional identity in relation to the news media

10.1 Introduction

This chapter builds on the work from the previous chapter to present and further discuss the main theoretical contribution of this study. Drawing upon the final two stages of Alvesson & Karreman’s (2011) framework for theory development, this chapter will analyse how ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies were a key process in regard to how participants adopted a ‘clear and stable’ identity when forging a relationship with the news media. The chapter will then focus on how adopting the aforementioned sense of a professional identity, while aspirational and momentarily less antagonistic, was deeply problematic as it did not engage with or even acknowledge the underlying tensions and contradictions.

10.2 Social workers’ professional identity, the news media and ‘self-othering’ strategies

The initial ‘breakdowns’ in meaning highlighted how some of the main critiques that participants directed towards the news media were in fact views and definitional struggles that they shared themselves. Once the ‘breakdowns’ had been established, the lack of existing theoretical work on the relationship between social work, the news media and identity formation led to the need to look more broadly for explanatory frameworks to assist in the analysis. As Alvesson & Karreman (2011, p. 7) write, the final stages of the theory development stage look to ‘solve the breakdowns’ through existing theories, and if not present, then this creates a clear opportunity for the development of new ideas. The authors write that what elevates a ‘breakdown’ into theory development is the broader relevance of the findings, the absence of existing theory to explain what is happening and the possibility of new interpretations. In this instance, a constructionist understanding of the relationship between news media and social work was absent from the literature and despite authors making reference to its role in identity formation (Payne 2006, 2014), no
one had explored this idea with any significant depth. In order to develop new theory and insights, Alvesson & Karreman (2011) suggest continued engagement with the empirical material guided by the use of the newly acquired theoretical and linguistic resources.

The identification of the ‘breakdowns’ led to a continued analysis and engagement with all the data, specifically further exploring constructionist ideas of subject positioning and focusing on the strategies used for reality maintenance and identity formation. It became apparent that when positioning themselves as social workers in relation to the news media, not only did participants adopt a ‘clear and stable’ social work identity but central to this were ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies, which while traditionally psychoanalytic concepts they have been further developed by several writers and incorporated into constructionist approaches to identity formation (Gough, McFadden & McDonald 2013; Jensen 2011; Krumer-Nevo 2002; Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012).

The next section will present an overview of how this study understands from a constructionist paradigm the key concepts of ‘othering’, ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies, before using them to explore participants’ identity formation processes.

i. ‘Othering’, ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies in subject positioning:

Definition

Several authors have explored the concept of ‘othering’ from a constructionist and postmodernist standpoint (Fine 1994; Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 2012; Jensen 2011). Traditionally a widely used concept in social theory, ‘othering refers to the way in which a dominant group classifies behaviour that is different from its own as “other”, enabling the “othered” group to be devalued and objectified’ (Mullaly 2010, Morley et al. 2013). ‘Othering’ depends on casting either a group or an individual into the role of the ‘other’ and forming one’s own identity in opposition to and, commonly, in vilification of this ‘other’ (Morley et al. 2013; Mullaly 2010). Jensen (2011, p. 63) suggests that a lot of recent work has raised ‘questions about the structuralist understanding of identity formation inherent in the concept of “othering” on two levels: firstly, the idea that the power to construct identity lies within the powerful, and secondly, the idea that identity formation can be grasped as a dichotomous relation between self/first and other’. Krumer-Nevo (2002) and Fine (1994) have argued for
the complexities of ‘othering’ processes beyond top-down structuralist approaches. Krumer-Nevo (2002, p. 304) has refined the theory by proposing that ‘othering’ processes occur within what he describes as the ‘arena of othering’, which is ‘a sphere of power relationship in which each participant defines both herself and the Other’ in a much more interconnected manner than previously understood.

In exploring the agency of individuals who feel ‘othered’, authors have written about the experience of ‘self-othering’ (Dietz 2011, Jensen 2011). The majority of the research has focused on migrant experiences and the identity struggles of individuals and groups who are positioned as the ‘other’. Dietz (2011) writes that migrants react to ‘othering’ through the process of ‘self-othering’ where individuals and groups resist their outsider status and reposition their identity drawing upon discourses celebrating and dignifying the uniqueness of minority groups. Jensen (2011) has written extensively about the topic of ‘self-othering’.

In her research exploring the ‘othering’ experiences of young ethnic minority men in Denmark, Jensen (2011, p. 63) identified two forms of agency, which were both argued to have a dimension of resistance: capitalisation and refusal. In both strategies the groups appropriated and refused elements of the ‘othering’ stereotypes in an attempt to give the category of the ‘young ethnic minority man’ a symbolic value. Jensen (2011, p. 66) argues that ‘resistance here takes the form of refusing to be devalued’ by owning the ‘othering’ identity and redefining it.

More broadly, Brennan (2004), Blackman (2008) and Teo (2011) claim that central to ‘othering’ is the underlying assumption that the process is partly a manifestation of projection. While traditionally a psychoanalytic concept originally attributed to Freud (Sandler 1998), projection refers to a type of defence mechanism where unacceptable feelings within an individual are disassociated from and attributed to another. As Rohleder (2014, p. 1) writes, ‘projection is involved in the process of ‘othering’, where the other comes to represent the opposite of the self, often that which is disavowed in the self’. The core idea, as Brennan (2004, p. 111) writes, is that ‘the person projecting the judgement is freed from its depressing effects on him or herself. However, he or she is dependent on the other carrying that projected affect ... a kind of hook on which the other’s negative affect can fix’.
Critical psychologists, adopting constructionist and postmodernist ideas, have challenged psychoanalysis’ understanding of projection, the fixed self and essentialising human behaviour. Stenner (1993) has specifically explored ‘othering’, projection and subject positioning in his research. For example, when researching jealously, critical psychologist Stenner (1993) writes that projection is inherent in jealousy and that it is not the property of a fixed self but rather a mechanism and strategy used to maintain a subject position. In researching jealousy in couples, Stenner (1993) argues that ‘othering’ and projection mechanisms were the key strategies used by individuals to maintain their position as the dominant and superior partner in the interview context in a fluid and contingent manner. ‘Othering’ and projection have been developed extensively since their modernist and psychoanalytic origins by critical and constructionist researchers as it is claimed that the traditional understanding has not fully captured the complexity of social phenomena of the relation self.

ii. ‘Othering’, ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies in subject positioning:

In the research

When adopting a ‘clear and stable’ professional identity in relation to the news media, participants utilised ‘self-othering’ strategies because they self-identified as the ‘other’ being oppressed by a larger and dominant societal force, and projection strategies because the critiques which they held towards the profession were dissociated from and attributed to the news media as a form of unfair criticism. The ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies utilised by participants are in line with Krummer-Nevo & Sidi (2012) and Jensen’s (2011) work that argues for a more fluid understanding of the concept giving greater emphasis to positioning and subjective agency.

The majority of participants (n = 18) engaged in a process of ‘self-othering’ when forming their professional identity in relation to the news media, constructing the profession within an oppressor/oppressed dichotomy. Within this discursive construction of the profession, greater emphasis was placed on the oppressive force that was limiting action, reifying the news media in the process rather than the internal conflicts and irreconcilable tensions that may still be present were these obstacles not present (Gray & Webb 2012). The dichotomy managed to momentarily displace internal anxieties and tensions and give greater focus to
the external force that is not allowing the profession to fulfil its main goals and ideals. In this positioning, social work seemed acontextual with participants referring to an aspirational ‘truth’ about the role of social work that seemed divorced from organisational influences.

Through ‘self-othering’ strategies, participants were positioned as highly disempowered individuals and this limited most participants’ capacity for action in terms of changing this situation they deemed oppressive. There was a clear frustration with being the ‘other’ and hopelessness as to what exactly can be done by participants to change this unfair situation. ‘Self-othering’ limited the ability of individuals to engage in any form of activism or consciousness-raising and this was deemed to be outside of the ability of most workers and therefore dependent on organisations. As evidenced by the quote below, participants for the most part were not members of the AASW, and for some the ‘self-othering’ extended to the association itself.

I want to be stronger in my sense of professional identity and being proud because I like being a social worker that prompted me to join the AASW and then I get so frustrated with them! I’m expecting them to raise the profile in the media and it’s just not happening. I don’t know their internal mechanism, maybe they’re entirely powerless as well.

(Participant 10, Interview)

This was a continuous theme throughout most interviews where there was an overemphasis on organisations like the AASW and universities to change the poor recognition and professional status without an exploration of the role of individual or collective action. As detailed in Part Two, the reconstruction stage of the reflection process began to enhance participants’ capacity for action, directly challenging the ‘self-othering’ position. The theory development work of Part Three is understood to be a continuation of the reconstruction stage that contributes to advancing discussion on the topic, which is currently dominated by ‘self-othering’ processes.

Furthermore, the analysis identified that projection strategies were also a key component of the problematic ‘clear and stable’ identity as the critiques that they held towards the profession were dissociated from and attributed to the news media as a form of unfair
criticism. This was identified as one of the major contradictions in participants’ accounts given that they reproached the news media for not being able to properly describe something they were unable to articulate themselves. When discussed separately, social workers seemed to share some of the tensions and lack of definitional clarity similar to some of the debates raised in the news media and the general public, especially in relation to ‘dark’ historical practices, current protective practices and the social control function of the profession. However, when discussed in the context of the news media, these critiques were dissociated from and projected onto the news media, with social workers not acknowledging the shared definitional struggles and critiques. Projection strategies were the key mechanism through which social workers formed and maintained their positioning within a ‘clear and stable’ social work professional identity, which as the next section will explore, was deeply problematic.

10.3 Discussion: Problematising social workers’ professional identity

The use of Alvesson & Karreman’s (2007) framework for theory development highlighted how, throughout the research process, participants shifted from a contradictory and contested identity towards a ‘clear and stable’ one when social work was discussed in the context of the news media, where social work was the ‘other’. Unfortunately, and as will be explored in this section, this process is fraught and lacking in significant reflexivity as: the core assumptions do not reflect what this and other key studies have identified (Aldridge 1990, 1994; Mawby et al. 1979); it places social work within an uncritical moral high ground through the use of social justice and human rights discourses; and does not acknowledge the high degree of conflict and tension experienced by practitioners.

i. Research challenges the dominant assumption about the news media impacts

The ‘clear and stable’ positioning is dependent on the belief that the profession is under attack from the news media. The media analysis and critical reflection portion of this research substantiated the local relevance of what Aldridge (1990, 1994) and Mawby et al. (1979) have argued previously regarding the media coverage of the profession. While this research has proposed that coverage is mostly absent, within the analysis it was also evident that existing coverage was far more diverse and positive than assumed. This did not
reflect the dominant assumptions regarding the degree of negative coverage and the overt focus on protective services. Child protection received almost the same amount of coverage as health, and the analysis did not find many instances of reporting that could be clearly argued to be critical of the profession. As Aldridge (1994) suggests, this is not to negate that social workers have received harsh reporting, including instances of harassment and public shaming, but this study proposes that this has been no more than any other profession whose actions were deemed unethical, illegal or vilified for larger ideological interests. Social workers themselves were also constructed using far more diverse demographics than argued in the literature and of surprise to participants, recognised mostly as tertiary trained. The media analysis emphasised how the dominant assumption that the profession is ‘under attack’, or unfairly critiqued, was something that neither this nor other key studies have been able to substantiate.

Furthermore, the dominant assumptions regarding the detrimental impacts on practice did not reflect the findings. For practitioners, there was not a direct link between news media coverage and practice, as the research process drew attention to the significance of personal experience and the role of media influence on practice (see Chapter 6). Participants discovered that the lack of client trust stemmed, not necessarily from the assumption that all social workers are child protection workers, but that the absence of coverage in part leads to a questioning of their professional competency. The absence was suggested by workers to be representative of and perpetuating the low professional status that social work holds, leading it to be experienced as a ‘second tier’ profession. Although rare, receiving media scrutiny of individual practice was reported as being a challenging experience but whose impacts were not long-lasting. The more destructive elements were the organisational responses to reporting that created a toxic culture of anxiety and recrimination.

The findings from the reflection process add further credence and a contemporary expression of the ideas formulated by Aldridge (1990; 1994), which identified the existence of a dominant and possibly unsubstantiated assumption within the professional community about the degree of negative coverage.
ii. Elevates social work to an uncritical moral high ground

A ‘clear and stable’ social work identity is primarily informed by the values domain as this provides its ethical and moral foundations (see Figure 8 p. 223). This was previously identified as drawing upon a broad, uncritical and aspirational discourse of the profession’s ethics, values and ideals, best exemplified in the Australian context by the AASW Code of Ethics and the IFSW’s definition of social work. Within this positioning the view is that the profession is a morally just project whose main function is to be the liberators of the oppressed. Drawing on human rights and social justice discourses, the professional project strives to do ‘what’s right’ and fight against the oppressive forces of society. The lack of recognition and support from the news media is seen as an impediment towards achieving this aim.

Drawing primarily from this domain ignores the modernist and post-modernist critiques that have preoccupied the social work literature over the past several decades (Allan et al. 2009; Morley et al. 2013). Social work values and ideals within this domain are reified and provide an almost dogmatic discourse that positions the profession as part of a morally just project whose main aim is the liberation of all human beings from oppression. Utilising these values uncritically to inform a professional identity not only ignores the inherent dangers of the ethnocentric and monoculture assumptions that inform them, but also the debates and approaches to practice, including critical reflection, that have been developed to manage some of the more problematic aspects of the moral foundations of the profession.

iii. Does not acknowledge the tension

The research identified a core tension in participants’ accounts between the social work values of social justice and anti-oppression and the neoliberal policies that have shaped the role of social work in organisational settings. Adopting a ‘clear and stable’ professional identity in relation to being unfairly critiqued or even ignored by the news media does not address these larger issues regarding the role of the profession, especially in relation to the oppressive functions of historical and current forms of state sponsored social work. The shift to a more stable sense of social work constructs an acontextual profession whose goals and ideals exist independently of organisational influences or values. While aspirational, it also
ignores the complexities of practice since its inception in reconciling the ‘ambivalently configured’ twin logics of regulation/control and security/care that constitute social work (Camilleri 1996; Fook 2002; Gray & Webb 2012, p. 5). Within a ‘clear and stable’ positioning, the control function is constructed as a negative role that workers need to distance themselves from, instead of understanding it as an indivisible element of practice (Camilleri 1996; Fook 2002). Focusing on unfair news media coverage denies the high degree of conflict, let alone understands it in order to better engage with the complexities. As identified previously, the shifts in focus towards the news media momentarily displaced the instability without addressing or better understanding the contradictions and ambiguities.

The research highlighted the identity formation and maintenance struggles experienced by participants. While embracing the tensions, contradictions and ambiguities is advocated by several social work academics (Ife 2001; Gray & Webb 2012), there appears to be a lack of understanding and guidance as to how workers can apply this in developing a less antagonistic and conflicted sense of a professional identity which, as a modernist concept, in part is dependent on some degree of stability in guiding action and practice (Ashford & Mael 1989). Participants in this research struggled to occupy a contradictory and contested positioning as the questioning of the aims and purposes of the profession was identified as a barrier towards meaningful practice given the fact that history may prove them wrong. The argument proposed is not that social workers should aspire to a clear and stable identity, but rather that continued inquiry is required to understand and negotiate the high degree of underlying tensions and ambiguities of the profession in contemporary society.

Critical reflection and professional supervision are identified as a key tool for practitioners to make sense of the complex thinking about knowledge, context, theory, practice and professional power (Fook 2012). Several authors have championed the use of critical reflection as a way of assisting practitioners to subject their practice to a ‘critical glaze’ and in doing so combine theory and practice ‘in creative and complex ways’ (Allan et al. 2009; Fook 2012, p. 39). While the reflective approach has a great deal to contribute, and forms a key part of the methodology of this research, it presupposes that practitioners have the ability and organisational support to be able to apply it frequently. Participants, the majority of which were not in social work roles, identified supervision and reflection as something
that many struggled to incorporate into their daily practices, given the lack of professional recognition and support at an organisational and policy level.

If social workers do not have the appropriate skills and knowledge to negotiate these tensions, they could continue to rely upon ‘stable’ and uncritical discourses as seen in this study in relation to the news media. While these discourses are potentially filled with reductionist oversimplifications that do not engage critically with the complexities of practice, they do seem to provide a clearer moral base that is more aligned with participants’ desire to help and to do ‘what’s right’ (Participant 12, Interview). There is a significant risk to this as the uncritical affirmation of these values and the lack of analysis as to how they relate to practice can mask the degree to which their daily actions have veered from these goals. The findings from this study add greater significance to the need for reflective practice and the importance for it to be instituted and supported at an organisational level (Gould & Baldwin 2004; Featherstone et al. 2014; Fook 2012).

10.5 Conclusion

This chapter has further elaborated and explored the central argument and main theoretical contribution of this study. Initially it focused on how ‘self-othering’ and projection strategies underscored participants’ relationship with the news media in the formation of their professional identity. This included a discussion of how adopting a ‘clear and stable’ sense of a professional identity, while aspirational, was problematic for numerous reasons. The next and final chapter will explore how the main ideas presented so far can be applied more broadly, informing a change in focus from the professional community in order to further advance discussion on this topic.

As a social worker the findings challenged not only my own assumptions but my understanding of the professional project. I completed this project with a deep appreciation for the commitment of social workers but a sense of concern regarding a profession that had spent so much energy focusing on external threats at the expense of better understanding itself and those around it. Part Three will conclude with my continuing reflexive analysis of my role within the research process, focusing specifically on the theory development stages.
Part Three: Reflexive analysis – My social work researcher identity

The Part Three reflexive analysis will adopt a more reflective tone in exploring my subject positioning as a researcher in the theory development stages. The transition to theory development presented significant challenges from the more task and structured elements of the previous sections. This was paralleled with my increased confidence and development as a social work academic and researcher identity. Primarily the analysis asked of me as a researcher to approach the social phenomena with an intellectual rigour and degree of creativity that presented a considerable change in thinking from the task focused approaches to practice. Alvesson & Karreman’s (2011) work was helpful and provided the necessary framework to address some of the initial insecurities. Throughout the research, and drawing on the core theory, I developed a particular interest in the dynamics of the process itself. This was possibly due to the fact that I was positioned as a ‘social work academic’ for the first time, after several years of being a practitioner. Given the negative connotation that this has in certain practice circles, I was keenly aware as to how this newly acquired role might shape my relationship with participants.

In my reflection journal I made several mentions of the ethical struggle of theorising about the positioning and identity formation processes of participants and, in particular, in relation to some of the inherent contradictions in their statements. Having developed strong relationships with most participants, I documented struggling with the idea that I would be analysing their involvement in the research process, something that while it was in the consent form, may not have been understood by everyone. I identified this as primarily a struggle between my personal values and education and workplace domains. It was a significant challenge to communicate to participants the constructionist underpinnings of the study as for most it appeared to be an empirical study that used critical reflection to find the ‘truth’ about media coverage and impacts.

The majority of the theory development work had not been completed so I was unable to discuss the main ideas presented in Part Three during the workshops. Alvesson & Karreman (2011) recommend presenting the findings to the participants at the end of the process to
further inform the writing; unfortunately, the time frame limitations of the thesis did not make this a possibility. In the end, I believe that the theoretical developments provide insights into the different ways in which participants formed their social work identity. The theorising does not critique participants’ professionalism or ability carry out their practice, but more significantly, identifies positioning and discursive struggles that, as evidenced in the literature review, are possibly shared and of potential relevance for the profession as a whole. As identified in the consent form (see appendix 2, p. 296), participants will be provided with the final version of the thesis once it has been submitted, and they will be invited to contact me directly to discuss the findings further.

This stage of the research was the first time I embraced my social work academic identity. This was primarily due to the fact that it occurred at the conclusion of the twelve-month reflection process and also that I was engaging with a degree of intellectual theorising that felt singular to my newly developing identity. The discoveries of the contradictory processes proved to be a significant milestone in my professional development as they marked a key instance where I felt reassured that I was making a contribution to this area of knowledge. The contradictions began to highlight inconsistencies within the social work literature that broadened my appreciation for the profession’s ambiguities and larger challenges. The theory development component emphasised for me that focusing on external threats seemed to be quite insular in tone and came at the expense of a better contextual understanding of professional social work.

As a social work practitioner it began to highlight the seemingly elusive ability of social workers to articulate what the social work role is, beyond grand statements. In my direct practice I observed to what degree uncritical affirmations of a social justice rhetoric dominated discussion within the professional community, without much insight as to how it relates to direct work. I would observe my own practice and identified a continually oscillating pendulum between care and control functions that were all necessary parts of larger interventions in order to address client needs and achieve my organisational role requirements. When this was discussed with colleagues, I would experience passionate rebuttals about the need to distance ourselves from these control elements. These conversations highlighted how protective the social workers I spoke to were of their
profession, but also how much they struggled to articulate what this constituted and confidently engage with its complexities.

The reflection period also drew my attention to how insular discussion about social work had become, to the extent that I observed how the vast majority of social work written content seems to be directed at other social workers. I was repeatedly confronted by the continual use of deeply problematic observations about how social work is the best profession, how social workers ‘are superheroes’ (Scheyett 2015) or a ‘testament to human hope’ (Truell 2015). By the conclusion of the research process I gained a deeper appreciation of the complexities of social work and a greater awareness of the problematic strategies used to negotiate such a conflicted sense of a professional identity.

The final reflection piece will continue with these themes and will be in the concluding section of the final chapter.
Part Three: Conclusion

Part Three has presented the main theoretical contribution of this study arguing that the relationship between social work and the news media can be better understood by examining the effects that dominant assumptions about reporting have on the formation of social workers’ professional identity. It has been proposed that the entrenched views about reporting play a significant function in negotiating and mediating the high degree of tension and conflict present in contemporary social work practice. Focusing on the existence of unfair media coverage as an external threat momentarily negotiated these conflicts by positioning workers within a morally clear and seemingly stable, but highly problematic, sense of a professional identity. Through the use of ‘self-o-thering’ and projection strategies, dominant ideas about news coverage became a tool with which social workers defused these tensions and temporarily displaced the ensuing dissonance and high degree of conflict.

Therefore, the findings suggest that a change in focus is required in order to break the repetitive cycle that has dominated discussion on this topic, characterised by an insular and highly reactive approach. The aim is to offer the ideas presented in this study with the anticipation that they will help the professional community revisit their understanding of this highly debated but poorly studied topic.

In the final section, Chapter 11 will conclude this thesis by answering the research question, discussing the implications of the findings, providing recommendations for future research and presenting the final and concluding reflexive piece.
Conclusion
Chapter 11:
Concluding the thesis

11.1 Introduction

In writing about social work and the news media, Meryl Aldridge observed that:

The belief that the profession gets unusually poor news media treatment is entrenched among social workers. (Aldridge 1990, p. 611)

This statement and the corresponding article proposed a counter argument to the dominant ideas present in much of the social work literature regarding news media coverage. As early as 1979, authors like Mawby et al. (1979) began to highlight that even during social work’s major scandals, coverage was not uniformly negative, and that outside of these key instances, reporting tended to be quite diverse and even positive. The volume of writings suggesting that social workers have possibly misconstrued the relationship has paled in comparison to that which strongly argues for the existence of an unfair and ongoing ideological attack from the mostly conservative mainstream news media. Aldridge (1990, 1994) and Mawby at al.’s (1979) work, although landmark studies, were without any substantial analysis as to what purpose focusing so greatly on news media attacks might serve for workers and the profession as a whole. This study makes a significant contribution to professional knowledge by not only offering an answer to this question, but also providing a greater appreciation of the function that dominant beliefs about the news media have in the formation of social workers’ professional identity. In doing so it becomes clear that a substantial change in focus is possibly needed from the social work professional community in order to better understand the complexities of this greatly debated but poorly studied topic.

The concluding chapter presents an overview of the main argument of the thesis and the possible contribution of the findings. Initially, this will be done by answering the research question: What relevance do news media portrayals of social work hold for the social construction of social work? Then it will discuss how the thesis can create a possible
revisioning for the social work professional project in the Australian context. This will be explored in relation to the broader relevance of the findings, including the contribution this thesis makes to: social work knowledge (including new conceptualisations), social workers, social work education and social work professional groups. This chapter will conclude with recommendations for future research and the final reflexive piece.

11.2 Answering the research question

In order to better understand the relevance that news media portrayals of social work hold for the social construction of social work, the research has answered this question at two levels: firstly, by identifying through the critical reflection process how social work is portrayed in the news media and how this coverage affects social workers at a intrapersonal, interpersonal and discursive level; and secondly, and most importantly, the function that the dominant assumptions regarding negative coverage (and its impacts) have for the formation of social workers’ professional identity.

In answering the research question, the relevance is that there is a dominant, taken-for-granted and mostly unchallenged discourse about unfair news coverage operating within sections of the social work professional community that has allowed social workers and social work organisations to negotiate the tensions and contradictions of contemporary practice. In doing so, they develop a seemingly more stable yet highly fraught sense of a professional identity by positioning themselves in an adversarial relationship with the news media.

11.3 Contribution of the thesis

This study aims to foster and better inform discussion about the relationship between social work and the news media within the social work professional community. In line with the constructionist underpinnings, a major objective is to help advance how the profession understands the issue, possibly moving it away from the seemingly entrenched disempowering discourses that dominate the literature and that were observed throughout the research process. In order to do so, this section will explore the broader relevance of the findings, including how they can potentially better inform social work knowledge, social
workers, social work education and social work professional groups. This will focus on how the findings present a new discourse offering different possibilities in understanding and acting.

i. Discussion: Broader relevance

In line with the constructionist underpinnings, the broader relevance of the findings will be explored in relation to their possible transferability (Burr 2015; Jorgensen & Karreman 2002; Witkin 2011). Discussion will concentrate on how the entrenched views about the news media may have come at the expense of better understanding the tensions and conflicts of the social work profession, suggesting that a significant shift could be required. Moving the focus away from the reactionary position that sees all negative reporting as inherently unfair, towards a more reflective and proactive approach that is less insular and looks to balance an interest in social work’s public image with a greater appreciation of what constitutes professional social work.

Discussion on this topic for the past several decades has been informed by the dominant view within the profession’s culture that no other profession has faced the continued backlash and rare cases of positive coverage. The idea that social work is singled out by the news media is particularly prevalent in the Australian and UK literature (Franklin & Parton 1991; Galilee 2005; Mendes 2001a). Aldridge (1990, 1994) was one of the first to argue for the existence of an entrenched view and how discussion has been seemingly stuck in a repetitive cycle. The cycle is characterised by making unsubstantiated and poorly theorised claims that the news media unfairly criticises social workers and proposing as a solution improved education and awareness-raising strategies (Aldridge 1990, 1994). While this may be a worthwhile approach in some circumstances, it is predicated by the assumption that social work is clearly definable and that through improved articulation of the social work role, the issue of poor media coverage will be resolved. As was observed during the research process, this negates the complexities involved in attempting to understand social work. The discussion is underpinned by a problematic understanding of the profession that is defensive in not acknowledging that media reporting could be highlighting serious professional failings, and reactionary as it is uncritical of the professional project and deeply passionate about restoring it to its aspirational ideal.
The findings from this study suggest that a shift is needed towards a more reflective and proactive approach. As evidenced by this study, critical reflection provides a suitable framework that can be extended from the practice focus, towards better understanding larger complexities of the profession. A more reflective approach would prioritise a continued effort to understand how a professional project with noble aims and seemingly irreconcilable tensions can develop a less fragmented professional identity from which to practice. A recent review of the Australian trade press highlighted how much focus is given to external threats that are limiting the ‘true nature’ of the profession’s work, seemingly at the expense of being able to reflect and articulate the social work role. The findings from this study emphasise the need for a proactive engagement from the professional community on understanding social work. In part, the repetitive cycle of discussion has lacked a clearer conceptualisation of the complexities of what they are advocating so strongly for. This is not to argue that it is possible to develop a unifying definition of social work, but continually relying on the idea that it is too broad, and therefore hard to define undermines the existence of the professional project. Unless there is a significant shift in focus the discussion will continue to be informed by an uncritical and highly problematic understanding of social work.

This study suggests that social workers could benefit from being less insular in their focus on media coverage. The long history of largely ineffectual public relation campaigns have at best been ignored and at worst come across as deeply self-serving. As has been argued previously (Warner 2015), social workers could spend these energies applying greater attention to how the news media constructs the people they work with and how this impacts them. As a professional group, social workers have the knowledge and skills necessary to be able to work with and use the news media to advocate for the rights and needs of the people they work with. A greater focus on how the media represents client populations and its impacts would be a much better use of time and effort. This would begin to address the fact that social work is not singled out in the news media and that every profession, along with a wide range of social groups, believes that they are not properly represented in the news.
ii. **Social work knowledge: Understanding the social work identity**

The thesis also makes an important contribution to social work knowledge by presenting a reconceptualisation of the elements and processes that make up social workers’ professional identity (See Figure 9, p. 252) and its relationship to the news media. As identified in Chapter 2, social workers’ professional identity is a frequently referenced but poorly theorised concept. This was evident during the research as the literature did not adequately account for the varying constructive practices that were occurring for participants when forming and maintaining their identity. In order to address this gap, this thesis offers a new way of understanding social workers’ professional identity by proposing that it is shaped primarily, but not exclusively, by eight domains through a reiterative and constructive process of identity formation and maintenance. The domains are in constant states of tension and alignment with each other, and are identified as being primarily at a discursive level with varying subject positions available. The new conceptualisation highlights the complexity of the processes and the high degree of tension and conflict that underlies the contemporary professional identity.

*Figure 9: Social workers’ professional identity*
The findings from this study demonstrate how social workers’ experience of their professional identity is precarious, contradictory and contested, with numerous elements shaping it and in constant tension with each other. The tension is identified as being predominantly between: the profession’s values and ideals, their job and organisational context, personal values and experience, their social work education, the broader socioeconomic and historical context, the professional community and the varying theoretical understandings and critiques of the profession. This supports the work of several social work theorists who, drawing upon constructionist ideas of identity, have highlighted the contradictions and ambiguities social workers experience in developing a professional identity (Hindmarsh 1993; Payne 2005; Weinberg 2014). The thesis provides a novel contribution to this body of knowledge by exploring the instances when the contested and contradictory aspects of their identity became highly conflicted (especially in relation to the profession’s role as an apparatus of the state, the coexistence of the twin logics of regulation/security and the morally contingent aspects of social work practice) and how the focus on the news media momentarily, and problematically, negotiated this high degree of tension.

The thesis highlights the fraught and problematic strategies that social workers use to negotiate the underlying tensions. The high degree of conflict, largely between what individuals think social work should be within the profession’s values and ideals (social justice, human rights), and what they do due to the organisational and larger policy context (manage risk, social control), can result in a fragile and deeply uncertain subject positioning as the constant critiques and uncertainty can undermine any course of action. This suggests that a renewed focus is required from the professional community in order to better understand and negotiate the conflict that social workers experience in daily practice. Failure to do so risks social workers continuing to draw upon problematic strategies that, while not addressing the underlying tensions, do serve a clear function by positioning workers within an aspirational understanding of the social work profession, closely aligned to workers desire to do ‘what’s right’.

The thesis offers a reconceptualisation of the domains and processes that constitute social workers’ professional identity. In doing so this study highlights how this central concept is
poorly theorised in the professional literature, creating clear opportunities for future research.

iii. A new understanding and approach for social workers

The thesis presents a new discourse for social workers about news media coverage, its impacts and the profession itself. The critical reflection process produced significant new understandings that highlighted how social workers’ views on the relationship between social work and the news media were based upon unquestioned assumptions entrenched within professional discourses, including the function that they serve in the formation of the professional identity. Therefore, not only are the findings from the reflection process of interest in their own right, they emphasise the benefits of the critical reflection framework used in this study as a way for social workers to better understand the assumptions, tensions and conflicts that underlie their professional identity and practice.

The main findings from the research process suggest that social work coverage in the Australian context is not unfairly negative (or focuses overwhelmingly on child protection failures) and its impacts on workers are diverse and wide-ranging. The research process highlighted how most participants’ understanding of the news media was based on a dominant assumption that when placed under a critical gaze was not reflective of their experience. This reconceptualisation of the relationship between social work and the news media is offered as a chance for workers to reflect upon their understandings and assumptions. This study presents a clear opportunity for social workers to revisit this highly debated topic, and explore it with the more reflective and less reactive approach presented in this study.

In researching social work and the news media, the thesis draws particular attention to the high degree of tension and conflict that social workers experience in contemporary practice. The reflection framework offers an approach for social workers to explore these contradictions further, especially in relation to the dissonance between their professional ideals and their jobs. The research methods developed provide a non-intrusive approach for social workers to better comprehend these tensions and can assist them in adopting a more reflective, inclusive and proactive approach to practice. While adopting a self-defensive
positioning momentarily provided a sense of a unified professional group, it ultimately did not engage with the underlying ambiguities and contradictions that need to be better negotiated in order to adopt a more reflective sense of a professional identity. This emphasises the importance of social workers adopting a critically reflective approach by continually identifying and engaging with the assumptions that govern their practice.

iv. A new focus for social work education

In researching the relationship between social work and the news media it became clear that it was underscored by much larger issues regarding some of the major challenges facing social workers. This is in part characterised by the struggle in being able to articulate what constitutes professional social work. As a key site for professional socialisation, and where most social workers first learn about the profession, the main insights have important implications for social work education. As a pluralist profession, social work has struggled to articulate how its philosophies and numerous and contradictory understandings of the social world co-exist. Social work education appears to be more preoccupied with developing practice skills instead of engaging with knowledge building, underpinned by a lack of engagement with better articulating and reconciling the dissonance between the profession’s underpinning philosophies (Gray & Webb 2012; Stoesz & Karger 2012). Social work education has an important role to play in supporting practitioners to continually engage with better understanding and articulating how the profession’s numerous theoretical frameworks can be developed into practice. The inability to do so has been argued to result in the utilisation of ambiguous philosophy and inadequate theorising, evidence of the profession’s intellectual failings (Stoesz & Karger 2012). This study suggests that without a continued intellectual engagement with the theoretical and philosophical foundations of the profession, practitioners may rely on projection and ‘self-othering’ strategies that in part negotiate this instability and provide a stable but highly problematic professional identity from which to practice. Education, as one of the first stages of professional socialisation, can play a key role in supporting social workers to engage and understand the tensions of the professional project.

The experience of research participants supports the view that education has in some respects not prepared social workers for the complexities of social work and the extent to
which organisational contexts shape the profession and practice (Healy & Meagher 2004; McDonald 2006). Socialising students into a morally stable profession is problematic, but so is identifying this tension without exploring how to practice and develop a professional identity within the conflict. There is a possible contradiction between the concept of a professional project, in the modernist sense, and a constructionist understanding of the social work identity with its lack of singular or stable truth about the profession from which to establish a clearly demarcated professional group. It has been argued that social work education is firmly entrenched within an ‘industrial-era paradigm of professionalism’ (Stoesz & Karger 2012). Professional socialisation could better prepare students for the uncertainties and ambiguities of practice. As identified previously, there are references in the literature addressing the need for practitioners to live with the tension and encouraging the use of pluralist approaches to inform practice (Allan et al. 2009; Ife 2001; Gray & Webb 2012). Although this study supports these ideas, translating them into practice and practice contexts that commonly require immediate and decisive action has to be the result of substantial intellectual engagement. This study suggests that this is something that most social workers may not be adequately prepared for, and it is this area that social work education could better address through greater incorporation of social constructionist pedagogy in the curriculum (Laird 1993; Ringel 2004; Witkin & Saleebey 2007).

v. A new approach for professional groups and associations

Professional groups like the AASW, NASW and BASW, and trade press publications like Community Care, AASW Bulletin, The Guardian Social Care Network and NASW News, have historically been the sites where the dominant assumptions regarding negative media coverage have been most widely repeated, discussed and cemented within the professional narrative. In Australia, concentrating on the perceived attacks has given the AASW and the trade press a clear purpose and role that, while managing to mediate the profession’s tensions and ambiguities, has come at the expense of better understanding them. This study suggests that the profession’s fascination with its own media has served as a powerful stabilising force but that it has not helped it gain a deeper understanding of the relationship or itself. Breaking this continued cycle will require a new approach that includes a greater engagement with media representations in general and not just focusing on social work coverage during child protection cases. A broader appreciation of the complexities of the
news creation process needs to be paralleled with a less reactionary approach when engaging with the media, organisations, politicians and the general public.

As Aldridge (1994) argued, understanding the material interests of media organisation and focusing on building relationships with it could be an effective way of better educating journalists about the profession, but this needs to be paralleled with a greater focus on advocating for social issues rather than the profession itself. This continued pursuit for an ‘objective’ representation of the profession does not appreciate the intricacies of the medium in its inability to adequately represent the full complexities of the social world. Efforts therefore should focus on how the news media portrays disadvantaged groups who may not have the resources and platform that social workers have in order to challenge the oppressive and detrimental effects of these representations. There is a clear challenge in terms of identifying the main goal of social work professional associations as there is an expectation from members that they exist to promote the profession, but in practice it is not clear to what extent this also includes client groups (Mendes 2003). The findings from this study suggest that the disproportionate focus on unfair representations of social workers may not only be informed by unsubstantiated assumptions, but also that those energies, skills and public platform could be used to advocate for social issues and social groups. For professional organisations, advocacy could focus primarily on the groups we work with, paralleled with a deeper and less insular understanding of the complexities of the profession.

The findings suggest that professional organisations also have an important role in the development of social work knowledge. A recurrent theme throughout the professional literature is the idea that many other professions are infringing on social work’s territory and unique skills, with many claims to singular expertise over certain areas and ways of understanding the social world. While social work awareness-raising and promotion campaigns are what members should expect, this study raises questions as to how well these organisations understand what they are trying to promote. Therefore, is the inability to articulate what social workers do not only due to its complexity but due to the poor theorising that is characteristic of the professional culture. This study has major implications for professional organisations as it suggests that advocacy should also be a continued effort towards better understanding the profession in a reflective, contextual and proactive
manner, instead of the defensive and reactionary approach that is prevalent. Professional organisations play a major role in the direction and development of the professional identity and they can show great leadership by balancing the outward focus of much of their advocacy work with an introspective approach that seeks to better understand social work in order to promote it.

11.4 Recommendations for future research

In reconceptualising the relationship between social work and the news media, this thesis creates new opportunities for future studies that progress the research agenda by focusing not only on the media but also social workers’ professional identity. This section explores how the design, methods and findings from this study create clear prospects for further research.

One of the most significant contributions of this thesis is the development of a framework for social workers, researchers and other groups to research the relationship between the news media and their profession. This study focused on the Australian context, so the first avenue for future research is the exploration of this same issue in major North American and UK metropolitan cities, identified as key sites in the literature review. The methods presented provide a framework for social workers to explore both the micro and macro domains of this phenomenon, and while the focus of this thesis was on the news media as a site for macro discourses, it could easily be translated to other sites, for example, policy documents. In this manner, this study contributes to social work research by further developing an epistemology and methodology that explores both the individual and discursive elements of social work. The methodology and design generated through this research can offer a framework for social work researchers wishing to explore and better understand the macro and micro composition of practice. Furthermore, the theory development component provides a clear approach for social workers to engage in one of the more challenging aspects of research. As demonstrated and detailed in this study, adopting a constructionist approach to analysing empirical data can greatly assist in better understanding the dynamics of the process. The ability to apply this research design to other areas of inquiry is identified as one of the principal and more immediate opportunities for future research that can come from this thesis.
As identified in the limitations section of Chapter 4, researching how film, television and emerging forms of social media construct the profession are important avenues for further study. This needs to be paralleled with a continuing appreciation and analysis of the media in an exploratory and less insular manner. The media analysis findings mirror prior research on the topic, emphasising that beyond key instances, coverage was not as poor as assumed. The ongoing engagement with news media discourses can give greater insight into dominant constructions of the profession beyond critical incidents. Although as the reflection process uncovered, the focus needs to be on continuing to better understand what constitutes professional practice away from the self-defensive advocacy strategies that permeate a lot of the trade press writings. This also needs to be balanced with a continued appreciation of the role of the media in society and in particular how it affects disadvantaged social groups. Social workers as tertiary trained practitioners have the skills, status and opportunities that many of their clients do not have and can use research and the media as a medium to advocate on their behalf.

In researching the relationship between social work and the news media, this study has identified not only its link to the professional identity of workers, but also how highly neglected the concept itself is in the professional literature. Further inquiry is needed to determine whether the social work identity domains and processes observed during this research are applicable to other contexts, and also to better understanding their dynamics. Within this topic there is also the opportunity to provide a greater appreciation of how social workers negotiate the tensions and uncertainties of contemporary practice in forming a professional identity. As detailed in the literature review chapter (Chapter 3), a constructionist paradigm has clear advantages over other approaches and provides a suitable research framework to better understand the varying identity formation dynamics that constitute such a core process for the constitution of a professional project.

In summary, the thesis presents a new approach and revisioning for the way that the social work professional community understands and engages with the news media and its professional identity, with clear avenues for future research. The aim is to offer the ideas presented in this study with the anticipation that they will help revisit this poorly studied area of knowledge.
11.5 Concluding reflexive analysis

As a researcher I have been an active agent and voice in this study. As a constructionist study the aim was to achieve ‘strong objectivity’ through ‘strong reflexivity’ by examining and explicitly acknowledging the cultural and historical positioning of the research and myself as the researcher (Harding 1991). In order to do so, I utilised reflexive processes throughout to provide a clear account of my role as a researcher in the knowledge creation process, changes in assumptions and my professional identity (Haraway 1996). The reflexive portions of this study have been instrumental in identifying how this thesis was developed. The concluding reflexive piece will focus on my final observations about my identity, the process and the social work professional community.

By the end of the research process I began to observe how the identity formation shifts for participants mirrored some of the identity formation processes that I experienced throughout the research. The development of my social work researcher identity was paralleled by my continued growth as a social worker practitioner. The research period was highlighted by a clearer realisation of a contradiction between my own practice role and social work ideals. The continued engagement with the social work literature led to a degree of disillusionment with the profession. As I gained more experience as a practitioner, I experienced first hand the contradictions of a profession whose morality is informed by social justice ideals but whose practices are formed very much by organisational demands. These feelings were reinforced through the reflection process in hearing workers share similar stories. My disillusionment was not constant and it was only through my engagement with the literature, practice, research and teaching that I came to adopt a more reflective sense of a professional identity that was both critical of social work but looked to make those critiques constructive and apply them to practice and research. My own experiences highlighted the intellectual rigour that is required to balance so many potentially corrosive contradictions, and also that very few workers have the time, space and resources to explore it as I did. I complete the research with a deeper appreciation of the goals and contributions of social workers, but with awareness that good intentions and feelings of satisfaction are not enough to constitute a professional project. Therefore, continued engagement with a better understanding of the profession is required as this is
pivotal to practice and identity formation. Otherwise, not only are the espoused social justice ideals not reflective of practice but their continued uncritical affirmation can potentially mask how much practice has veered from these goals. Personally, the process has highlighted the worth of critical reflection and also the challenges of adopting it in practice.

Ultimately, the study challenged and further developed my own understanding of social work and its relationship with the news media. The initial idealistic goals of ‘standing up’ for social work through a research project developed into a far more nuanced and sophisticated appreciation of the topic and the profession. Over the course of the four years it took to complete this study, I felt that my interest in this topic never wavered, as each new stage of analysis yielded fascinating new insights. My interest is now focused on sharing these insights that in certain respects challenge dominant and very much entrenched wisdoms within the professional community. I am also cautious, as challenging entrenched views can create a wide range of responses, and this is where I believe the values underpinning constructionist thought will be very useful. As an active member of this community, I have a deep appreciation for the contribution of fellow social workers and the important roles that they carry out in daily practice in various fields and settings. With direct experience in the complexities of practice, I am also highly critical of a professional project that aspires to such noble goals but does not engage with its ideals and contradictions critically and rigorously. The risk of this lack of introspection is that social work will continually be apologising for past acts and placing disproportionate focus on external threats at the expense of better understanding its internal and contextual complexities. It is this belief that underlies the need for a change of focus from the professional community.

11.6 Final conclusion

In conclusion, researching social work and the news media drew particular attention to the tensions and conflicts of contemporary social work practice. With a depth and rigour absent from most work on the topic, this study makes an innovative contribution to social work knowledge by proposing that the profession’s dominant assumptions about the news media may have allowed workers, and the profession, to momentarily and problematically mediate the potentially paralysing dissonance experienced in practice by focusing on the
existence of an external threat. These findings suggest a significant change in focus from the professional community may be needed towards a more reflective, inclusive and less reactionary approach when dealing with the news media and the profession itself. As a social worker and a researcher, I look forward to contributing these insights in the spirit of dialogue, collaboration and respect that has shaped all the work so far. I complete this study with a renewed sense of enthusiasm and purpose as it creates a clear opportunity to have a much needed discussion about the complexities and contradictions of what it means to be a social worker.
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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information sheet for participants

SOCIAL WORK AND THE NEWS MEDIA

Project Title: The relevance of news media portrayals of Social Work in the social construction of Social Work practice

Who is involved in this research project?

- This research is being conducted as part of the Doctor of Philosophy (DR073) degree from RMIT University in the School of Global, Urban and Social Studies (GUSS) by Sebastian Cordoba (PhD student), Associate Professor Martyn Jones (Primary Supervisor) and Associate Professor John Whyte (Secondary Supervisor).
- The project has been approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee.

What is the project about? What are the questions being addressed?

Research has found that there is a dominant perception amongst Social Workers in the US and UK that the news media has consistently portrayed a biased and negative view of the profession and this has a detrimental impact on practice, client trust, worker confidence and the very future of the profession in its capacity to recruit new workers. Unfortunately, there is a lack of research to substantiate the local relevance of these strongly held beliefs and explore how such a key social institution shapes Social Work practice.

In order to address a substantial gap in professional knowledge this research aims to answer the following question: What relevance do news media portrayals of Social Work hold for the social construction of Social Work practice?

The research will explore how the Social Work profession is portrayed in the news media and how this shapes Social Workers in contemporary Melbourne, Australia. Through a mixed method, critical reflection process with 30 practising Social Workers (involving self-reflection journals, interviews and group work) and using discourse analysis (analysing local news media and Social Work practice discourses), the research aims to better understand how news media portrayals of the profession affect workers professionally and personally.
If I agree to participate, what will I be required to do?

You are invited to take part of a 3-stage critical reflection process that consists of a self reflection journal, an individual interview and a group workshop over approximately a 12 month period. The research is being conducted between July 2013 and June 2014.

- During the **first stage**, a self reflection journal will be provided to explore your practice over a 3 month period in relation to the following question “What is the relationship between news media representations of Social Work and your Social Work practice?” The journal does not have to be submitted and you can document as much, or as little, as needed.

- During the **second stage**, you will take part in a 1 hour individual semi-structured interview that explores your reflection findings/insights and, to provide a degree of context, your understanding of what is Social Work in contemporary Melbourne, and where you place yourself as a worker. At the conclusion, 3 further questions will be added to the journal that consist of analysing the news media you normally access for specific examples of Social Work related content, and reflecting upon how news media constructions of the profession affect you personally and professionally. The interviews will be audio recorded.

- During the **third and final stage** (conducted approximately 3 to 4 months after the interview) a 4 hour workshop will be carried out with 9 fellow Social Workers, which moves from analysis towards exploring new approaches to practice and theory. There will be three workshops in total but you only need to attend one. The aim is to build on the work from the past two stages and to identify how Social Workers can operate differently, how assumptions have changed, or been affirmed, and explore new understandings and approaches to practice. The workshops will be audio recorded.

As a participant, it is expected that the research process will take 5-6 hours over the 12 month period, plus the highly flexible nature of the personal journal.

Alongside the 3-stage critical reflection process, the research team will be seeking to understand how news media discourses about the profession are reflected and/or resisted in Social Work practice discourses. We will be doing this by analysing news media coverage of the profession and the stage 2 individual interview transcripts, looking for similarities and differences in regards to how the Social Work profession is constructed. The findings will be presented and discussed during the workshop.

**What are the benefits associated with participation?**

- In participating in the research you will be taking part in a project that seeks to contribute to and benefit professional Social Workers and Social Work knowledge by exploring the ways in which news media construction of the profession shape workers’ capacity for action.

- As a Social Work practitioner, the critical self reflection process could be beneficial to your own practice as it not only seeks to better understand the role that such a key social institution plays, but to also explore how workers can shape their theory and practice to be more emancipatory and anti-oppressive.
• If you are a member of the AASW, taking part in the research project would count towards your Continuing Professional Development (CPD) goals by undertaking in critical reflection (Category 2 Skills and Knowledge) and contributing to research (Category 3 Contributing to the profession).

• In appreciation for your participation, a thirty dollar ($30) Coles Group & Myer Gift Card will be provided upon your completion of the group workshops.

Whom should I contact if I would like to participate?

• If you would like to receive further information, including the full participant information and consent document, please contact:

  Sebastian Cordoba  
  RMIT University  
  School of Global, Urban and Social Studies

Yours sincerely
Appendix 2: Consent form

CONSENT

I have had the project explained to me, and I have read the information sheet

1. I agree to participate in the research project as described
2. I agree:
   - to complete the critically reflection journal
   - to be interviewed and to take part in the group workshops
   - that my voice will be audio recorded

3. I acknowledge that:

   (a) I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied (unless follow-up is needed for safety).
   (b) The project is for the purpose of research. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
   (c) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
   (d) The security of the research data will be protected during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a summary report of the project outcomes will be provided to all the research participants, and an extra copy for your manager/institution upon request. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant’s Consent

Participant: Date:
(Signature)
SOCIAL WORK AND THE NEWS MEDIA

An invitation to take part in a research project about Social Workers and the news media

A research project as part of a PhD thesis at RMIT University is currently underway exploring “What relevance do news media portrayals of Social Work hold for the social construction of Social Work practice?”

Sebastian Cordoba, the principal investigator, is seeking practising Social Workers with 2 or more years experience working in the Melbourne area to be involved in this project to better understand how news media portrayals of the profession shape practice. By working collaboratively with 30 practising Social Workers and analysing the local news media, the research aims to better understand how news media portrayals of the profession affect workers professionally and personally.

Your wealth of knowledge and experience would make a valuable contribution to this project.

For further details please contact the principal investigator, Sebastian Cordoba
RMIT University
Notice of Approval

Date: 22 February 2013
Project number: CHEAN A-2000778-01-13
Project title: The relevance of news media in the social construction of social work practice
Risk classification: Low Risk
Investigator: Mr Pushkar Cordoba
Approved: From: 22 February 2013 To: 22 February 2016

I am pleased to advise that your application has been granted ethics approval by the Design and Social Context College Human Ethics Advisory Network as a sub-committee of the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Terms of approval:

1. Responsibilities of investigator
   It is the responsibility of the above investigator/s to ensure that all other investigators and staff on a project are aware of the terms of approval and to ensure that the project is conducted as approved by the CHEAN. Approval is only valid whilst the investigator/s holds a position at RMIT University.

2. Amendments
   Approval must be sought from the CHEAN to amend any aspect of a project including approved documents. To apply for an amendment please use the 'Request for Amendment Form' that is available on the RMIT website. Amendments must not be implemented without first gaining approval from CHEAN.

3. Adverse events
   You should notify HREC immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.

4. Participant Information and Consent Form (PICF)
   The PICF and any other material used to recruit and inform participants of the project must include the RMIT university logo. The PICF must contain a complaints clause including the project number.

5. Annual reports
   Continued approval of this project is dependent on the submission of an annual report. This form can be located online on the human research ethics web page on the RMIT website.

6. Final report
   A final report must be provided at the conclusion of the project. CHEAN must be notified if the project is discontinued before the expected date of completion.

7. Monitoring
   Projects may be subject to an audit or any other form of monitoring by HREC at any time.

8. Retention and storage of data
   The investigator is responsible for the storage and retention of original data pertaining to a project for a minimum period of five years.

In any future correspondence please quote the project number and project title.

On behalf of the DSC College Human Ethics Advisory Network I wish you well in your research.