Popular culture's usefulness for social work practitioners' self–reflections and relationship–based practice

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Abstract

In this article, we analyze two group interviews in which 17 Finnish social workers discuss social work–relevant popular culture representations of and popular culture's usefulness to social work practice. As a result of our thematic content analysis, we identified two themes under which the benefits of popular culture in social work were made sense of by interviewees. First, social work–relevant popular culture representations were described as useful for practitioners' self-reflections since they can be used to assess different actor's stand points and reflect practitioners' own emotions, varying interpretations, assumptions, epistemological standings, and actions. Self-reflection can also help practitioners to identify culturally embedded stereotypes and the expectations people may have for social workers. Second, popular culture materials can be beneficial to informing relationship-based social work practice by building trust among social workers and clients. According to our interviewees, popular culture materials can be used to explore new topics for discussion and help establish common ground with a client. Moreover, social workers can deconstruct social work–related archetypes together with clients as a means of dismantling mistrust towards social work as a profession. These results encourage practitioners to reflect upon social worker representations in popular culture among social workers as well with their clients. The self-reflection upon popular culture materials could also be usefully applied during reflexive discussions held in work communities, in client work and when supervising affective work performed by social workers.

Introduction

In this article, we analyze two group interviews in which 17 Finnish social workers discuss social work-relevant popular culture representations of and popular culture's usefulness to social work practice in relation to practitioners' self-reflections and relationship-based practice. Here, when using the concept popular culture, we refer to various mediums of cultural expression and practice that are widely consumed and produced for large audiences, such as books, songs, video games, cartoons, films, radio programs, magazines, stand-up comedy routines, and (reality) television shows, which aim to construct both «fictional» and «factual» representations of various phenomena.

Professional practice is a common subject of movies, documentaries, television series, print media, and books, which also influence impressions of professional practice for large audiences (Selmini, 2020). Images of specific professions are communicated and mediated extensively through various forms of popular culture in which professional practices and ethics as well as practitioners' client relationships can become the target of both moral appraisals and cultural critiques (Selmini, 2020; Spitz, 2000). Thus, popular culture is a contested domain of social life since it both controls and expands awareness of cultural constructs and images of professional practices through the popular imagination (Fitch & Chorazy, 2022; Guy, 2007).

Most of the existing literature on popular culture's relevance to social work has focused on educational and learning processes. Previous research revealed that a wide range of popular culture material — including television, film, fiction, and music — can be used to enhance a variety of skills, including improving social work students' critical thinking skills (Heino & Tarkiainen, 2024; van Wormer & Juby, 2016; Tarkiainen et al., 2022), stimulating discussions (Liles, 2007; Papadaki, 2022), or bringing abstract macro-level policy concepts and complex social problems into the classroom in a concrete format (Anderson et al., 2005). In addition, popular culture has been identified as useful in reflecting ethical dilemmas and the challenges practitioners encounter in their decision-making (Brown & Keating, 2015; see also Jubas & Knutson, 2012). In general, some argue that incorporating popular culture into professional education fosters curiosity, which furthers the development of reflective practitioners (Jubas, 2023). However, a reluctance to use popular fiction has persisted in some parts of academia due to the presumed negative effects of the stereotypes disseminated through popular culture, possibly tainting the perceptions and expectations of students (Vandermeersche et al., 2013).

We identified only a few studies which have evaluated the usefulness of popular culture for social work practice. For instance, Burr and Jarvis (2007) argue that popular cultural forms are central to the dissemination of new social practices in social work, such as reconceptualizing concepts and social problems. In clinical social work settings, clients' engagement with popular cultural texts — such as vampire romances describing controlling and abusive behavior in a romantic relationship can help clients co-and

deconstruct their personal narratives (Béres, 2002). In addition, an autofiction novel can be used to encourage professionals to reflect upon their perceptions of clients as well as on their own work practices (Fagerström, 2016).

Interestingly, the various portrayals of social work in popular culture can contribute to the shaping of the public's images of social workers, social work clients, and social problems (Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Valentine & Freeman, 2002[1]). Thus far, few studies have reported social workers' own reactions to social work-relevant popular culture representations. In one example, however, a storyline on the British soap opera, *EastEnders*, social workers reacted negatively, objecting to the procedural inaccuracies and misrepresentations portrayed through interactions between the profession and the people with whom they work (Edmondson & King, 2016).

In another example, the 1960s US drama, *East Side/West Side*, social workers felt their professional image was damaged (Andrews, 1987). In comparison, a few studies emerged documenting the reception of popular culture representations among other professionals. For example, Godsey et al.'s (2020) results show that nurses are frustrated by the way they are portrayed in popular culture, specifically in romantic storylines as hypersexualized and unprofessional individuals unable to separate their personal lives from the workplace and who frequently abandon their professional duties to have a tryst with a physician or patient. One explanation nurses themselves provided for these persistent inaccuracies may relate to how unentertaining the reality of nursing actually is.

Similarly, Huey (2010) interviewed members of Canadian police forces who experienced citizen queries and unrealistic images of police work based on television program portrayals. Such images consisted of glamorized representations of high-tech police investigative work that translated into unrealistic expectations and demands placed on investigation processes. Some investigators reported feelings of frustration in these expectations, which created false hope on extensive investigative work. However, most of those interviewed viewed such queries as opportunities to educate the public about the realities of policing and to dispel some of the myths about police work perpetuated by popular culture images.

Against this backdrop, here, we aim to fill a gap in the existing literature by asking the following question:

> How do social workers perceive social work representations and popular culture materials as beneficial to them as practitioners?

To address this question, we rely on a dataset from two group interviews in which Finnish social workers reflected upon popular culture representations relevant to social work and the potential use of popular culture materials in social workers' daily practice. Before participating in the interviews, social workers read and analyzed two chapters of

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[1] However, *cf*. Condie et al. (1978) and Le Croy & Stinson (2004).

Hullut ihanat linnut [in English, *Crazy, Lovely Birds*], an autobiographical novel written by the Finnish author, Joonatan Tola. The novel received widespread media attention and provoked a public discussion about the Finnish child protection system. We chose these two chapters because they explicitly described social worker characters and child welfare home visits. We aimed to use the chapters from the novel as a stimulus for interviewees' reflections. We focused on fictional representations of social work because they have the liberty to interrogate an occupational identity and its construction as a profession without the expectations of being bound by accuracy, factual truth or a positive representation (see also Fitch & Chorazy, 2022).

The article is structured as follows. First, we summarize previous research on social work–relevant representations in popular culture. Second, we introduce our dataset, methodological approach, and the analytical process. Third, we discuss our key findings, which fell under two themes, in which popular culture enhances both practitioners' self-reflections and relationship-based practice with clients. Finally, we discuss our findings in relation to the existing literature and identify directions for future social work research.

Previous research on social work: relevant representations in popular culture

Previous literature has focused on the analysis of several social work-related phenomena in popular culture. These include representations of child maltreatment (Hubka et al., 2009), motherhood (Wilton, 2018), domestic violence (Shoos, 2020), shame (Dancus, 2023), prejudice (Manthorpe, 2003), intersectionality (Papadaki, 2022; Tarkiainen, 2022), racialized micro-aggressions (van Wormer & Juby, 2016), welfare deservingness (Gibbs & Lehtonen, 2019; Tarkiainen, 2022), drug and alcohol misuse (Tarkiainen, 2023), poverty, developmental disabilities, divorce, delinquency, parental death, and sex work (Freeman & Valentine, 2004).

According to Henderson and Franklin's (2007) analysis, social worker characters in popular culture materials tend to feature in storylines concerning children through themes such as access disputes, fostering, and adoption. Edmonson and King (2016) argue that portrayals of social workers as «child catchers» serve to foster a negative impression of social work as well as endorse particular neoliberal ideologies and discourses about welfare and social work. Furthermore, social worker portrayals in popular culture may conform to stereotypes of social workers as female caretakers and nurturers, whereas portrayals of male social workers may construct a tough and heroic image (Freeman & Valentine, 2004).

When portrayed heroically, the social worker characters in popular culture may, for instance, dedicatedly and idealistically champion the rights of clients, deliver the best possible services (Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Valentine & Freeman, 2002), or act as a socially just maverick working for the betterment of oppressed clients (Andrews, 1987). Such visuals are also meaningful for social work representations in popular culture. For

example, a social work element of control can be highlighted through a character's large and muscular physique (Hubka et al., 2009) or a large bosom to typecast a well-meaning nitwit character (Hiersteiner, 1998).

According to Henderson and Franklin's (2007) analysis, British television dramas portray social care professionals in primarily positive terms, as friendly, sympathetic, and «good listeners». However, such characters tend to enter the narrative on a short-term basis, have a peripheral role, and are represented in relation to a particular problem rather than becoming fully rounded characters. By contrast, social workers may be portrayed as enforcing inhuman practices and engaging in misconduct. For instance, social workers can be represented as incompetent, judgmental, hard-hearted, or acting unethically, through behaviors such as having sexual relationships with their clients (Freeman & Valentine, 2004). Incompetence may also be represented by showing social workers as emotionally disconnected from their clients and failing to foster a real conversation with the people they are supposed to assist (Dancus, 2023). The social worker can also be portrayed as «out of place», comically intellectual, and unable to handle rough neighborhood situations (Hiersteiner, 1998).

In soap operas, social worker characters have also been treated disrespectfully and in an openly hostile manner through a stereotypical «soap bitch» character type, for instance (Henderson & Franklin, 2007). In addition, the absence of social workers is interesting as a part of the dramatic tradition of Disney animated feature films, wherein heroes — often children — work on their own to overcome the maltreatment they experience (Hubka et al., 2009). Notably children's television is often omitted from analysis, despite how important such programs are in circulating messages about the profession to younger audiences (Henderson & Franklin, 2007).

Empirical material

Our data consist of two group interviews, which we conducted in spring 2023. The Finnish interviewees (n = 17) were 30- to 57-years-old, held a Master's degree in social work, and were qualified social workers with 3 to 20 years of work experience as a practitioner. Interviewees were also participants of a 2.5-year-long specialization program in child welfare services jointly organized by the University of Helsinki and the University of Tampere. The program aims to support the skills of social work practitioners by providing course participants novel theoretical and practical points of view on social work with families and children. Professional specialization programs in Finnish social work education aim to promote the upskilling of people in areas which are both topical to and significant for the labor market.

This study followed the guidelines on research ethics ascribed by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity appointed by the Ministry of Education and Culture (TENK, 2019). Participation in the group interviews was voluntary and all participants were provided information in writing and verbally about the research project.

This study did not go through evaluation by the ethical committees at our universities, since evaluation is required only in ethically challenging research designs, such as when it involves minors, participants are exposed to exceptionally strong stimuli, research poses a security risk or a risk to the mental health of participants beyond the risks encountered in normal life (TENK, 2019). Participants, however, provided their informed oral consent for participation in this study, although they did not provide written consent for their data to be shared publicly. All participants were numbered to protect their anonymity.

Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to read and analyze two chapters of *Hullut ihanat linnut* [in English, *Crazy, Lovely Birds*], an autobiographical novel written by the Finnish author, Joonatan Tola, published in 2023. Thematically, *Hullut ihanat linnut* explores several phenomena relevant to social work practice, such as child neglect, trauma, the complexity of care relations between a child and a sick parent, relationships between siblings, poverty, mental illness, and social stigma.

Tola (2023, p. 218) himself has stated that the book explores his own «broken life story through the use of fiction literature and imagination». While there is no clear definition of nor criteria for autofiction, autofictional texts typically contain a combination of real and invented elements, some kind of correspondence between the author and character or a narrator as well as stylistic experimentation (Effe & Lawlor, 2022). *Hullut ihanat linnut* contains all of these elements and the author is well-known for his unique use of dark humor when describing emotion-provoking family issues and events.

The interviews lasted a total of 180 minutes, which we recorded and transcribed. We chose group interviews, because in our view this form of interviewing allows researchers to observe the discussion between interview participants and to examine whether the views expressed on social worker representations are generally shared or whether the various participants have different or conflicting views.

Since there is very little previous research on how social workers perceive representations of their profession, we also drew on Pietilä's (2010) view that a group interview can bring out diverse and surprising views as each participant's contribution influences others and, at best, initiates a collective reflection on this topic. During the interviews, we asked participants to reflect upon their thoughts about Tola's book chapters, to express their views on how social work and social workers are represented in popular culture in general as well to share their experiences and opinions — including any benefits and limitations — on the use of popular cultural materials as practitioners.

Methodological approach and analytical process

We used thematic content analysis as a method to identify the most relevant themes interviewees discussed around the use of popular culture in social work. In our analysis, we flexibly followed the analytical steps identified by Braun and Clarke (2006). For the

first round of the analysis, the first author became familiar with the data by reading it in its entirety, took notes while reading, and generated codes for the data. In the second round, the first author organized the codes and merged them into two key themes relevant to our research question. During the third stage, the first and second authors discussed their interpretations of the themes and together shared their interpretations and conclusions in order to reach consensus. The perspectives of all the interviewees are represented in the result section.

Popular culture enhances practitioners' self-reflection

The first theme related to segments of our data in which popular culture materials and social work representations were described as useful for social work practitioners' self-reflections. The analysis of the popular culture material and its social worker representations prompted interviewees to look at the phenomena of social work from different perspectives. The analysis of the chapters was described as evoking a wide range of emotions in interviewees, such as anxiety, pity, irritation, anger, second-hand embarrassment, and sadness.

Some interviewees had never read literature related to social work and realized that they could learn a lot from popular culture materials and representations of social workers by reflecting upon them in shared discussions. Some of the interviewees had avoided familiarizing themselves with popular culture representations of social work, especially during their free time. This was motivated by a desire to take a break away from their work as practitioners and to «protect» themselves from these representations. Interviewees discussed how reflecting upon social work representations in popular culture requires a practitioner to exit the defensive mode in which one is tempted to assess the «truthfulness» of the narrative and the credibility of such social work portrayals.

Interviewees expressed their experiences of perceiving the same popular culture representation rather differently (see also Friedman, 2015), whereby they created varied — even contradictory — interpretations of social worker characters and their own assumptions related to the storyline. In general, interviewees described the analysis of social worker characters as thought-provoking:

> Interviewee 8: Those social workers felt rather caricaturized and rather repulsive. It made me think about my own practice and gave me a bit of second-hand embarrassment. Since this is the way people really experience things, it was very thought-provoking. (Interview 2)

The analysis and discussion of social worker characters was, however, described as useful, since it helped to assess the culturally embedded ideas, stereotypes, and expectations people may have for social workers. This helped interviewees to reflect upon how they may be viewed as social workers or how to practice when handling specific client cases:

> Interviewee 15: Yes, and maybe, as we have talked here, that does create an understanding of how we are perceived, and you start to wonder if this is the way I want to be seen or if I would like to be viewed in some other way. (Interview 1)

According to interviewees, popular culture materials can also help social workers to reflect upon what is relatable and credible in social worker representations and what kinds of actions they themselves find appropriate or inappropriate. Moreover, according to interviewees, reflecting upon popular culture materials can help social workers to identify different perspectives and interpretations of the same situation, given that such can enrich the image of various phenomena, including how best to meet a client's needs. For example, popular culture materials may help social workers to assess how a child perceives a social worker's use of discretional power, how a social worker's use of power influences a child, and consider what remains hidden in frontline encounters.

Interviewees perceived autofiction as an inspiring and challenging genre for social workers to analyze, since it includes factual and non-factual content and events. All of this might also help social workers to reflect upon the epistemological standing related to knowledge and various interpretations from different actors regarding the same set of events. In particular, autofiction was identified as a genre in which social work clients can use counterpower when describing their interpretations of the use of a social worker's normative gaze. Counterpower can be used, for example, when a social worker character's physical appearance is described as displeasing or when social workers and their actions are represented as incompetent:

> Interviewee 14: He wrote about social workers in such ways. I was somehow... I recognized that they were described in a way that makes you wonder why is it always like this. I mean not always, but often you recognize the archetype of a social worker in these portrayals. I mean that as a man he writes the female social worker characters in a way that they are not there as professionals, but rather he assesses their physical appearance. I noticed that it started to irritate me. When I was reading it, I wonder why was this the case, since I noticed this elsewhere, too.

> Interviewee 12: I was wondering if it because he is the object of evaluation here, so it is a reaction to defend himself, to think, «I will evaluate those [social workers], too».

> Interviewee 14: He uses power in that way. I think it is very understandable, I think...

> Interviewee 16: I didn't even think of it that way. That is such an interesting idea that it reflects the normative work social workers do. So, that is in the background when you start to assess social workers personal qualities. (Interview 1)

Thus, interviewees discussed how popular culture can serve as an act of resistance when used to represent lives as they are lived (see also Ungar, 2011), which can be beneficial in self-reflection as a practitioner who uses their discretion and power. Interviewees thought that, in popular culture representations, it is good to share the client's narra-

tives of their experiences and points of views, even though they may lie in contrast to the interpretations of social workers and their actions. However, interviewees viewed Finnish reality TV portrayals of child welfare clients and social workers as potentially harmful as they have for example represented foster care practices as arbitrary and unjust.

Interviewees also recognized positive social work representations in several Finnish and international films (e.g., *Yösyöttö* [in English, *Man and a Baby*], *System Crasher*, and *Joker*) and television series (e.g., *Judging Amy*, *Toisen kanssa* [in English, *With Another Man*]). Interviewees discussed how social workers are portrayed in these films and television series in a nuanced manner and not as typical caricatures. However, these positive representations can also be problematic according to the interviewees:

> Interviewee (unknown): *Judging Amy*.

> Interviewee 13: But wasn't it a little... Like a traditional auntie who went to the child care institutions...

> Interviewer: Yes, she never made a mistake. That I remember...

> Interviewee 17: Well, yes, but maybe you miss that type. Because, according to my own experience, client cases can be tricky and there are many sides and poor options to choose from and you try to consider them and move forward. So, there is pain and a state of not knowing and you must act, and you must make a decision. So, that type could be seen [in these representations], not just that it is always a confrontation. Or that a social worker comes with her high morals [in Finnish, *kukkahattunsa*] and folder and is disconnected from reality. And [they] come to dictate how things are [laughter] and threaten with something.

> Interviewee 11: Exactly, so there is no professional evaluation at all. You just come to shake your head and whine or then just take the children and leave. (Interview 1)

Interviewees discussed how unrealistic, negative, and bureaucratic images of social workers in popular culture are difficult to identify with as a practitioner. Therefore, this «child catcher» image could be challenged by constructing a more multifaceted image of the social work profession and practitioners as people who themselves have personal preferences or life crises. Interviewees mentioned the British television series, *Happy Valley*, as an example of a good representation of realistic, complex, and nuanced interactions between frontline workers and their clients (see Wilton, 2018), and hoped for similar kinds of representations of social workers given that stereotypical images may increase prejudice towards social work.

In both groups, interviewees used the television series, *Pala sydämestä* [in English, *A Piece of My Heart*], as an example of a Finnish social worker. In this series, a lead character is idealistically committed to her work, despite having weak professional boundaries, as evidenced by having an intimate relationship with a client. Many interviewees thought the social work representation in *Pala sydämestä* was lazy and unrealistic, and simply used to

attract television viewers' attention. Others, however, held opposing viewpoints, as we see in the following extract:

> Interviewee 11: I thought it had a fresh touch, since it was made to look a bit like a cop. I mean...

> Interviewee 17: I thought it was somehow ridiculous that she was working all nights and weekends.

> Interviewee 11: Yes, I thought that as well of course, that an error, error, you can't do that, but then again, I thought maybe the cops also watch police television series in a similar way.

> Interviewee 12: Exactly.

> Interviewee 11: ... Well, it isn't just like that, however, I kind of liked the rock attitude that you go and do.

> Interviewee 16: Yes, but then again, it was a caricature that you are just a passionate person who...

> Interviewee 11: But she was broken herself.

> Interviewee 16: Well, I guess, yes, but if you think about who else wouldn't break themselves.... If you think about nurses, they are fragile and kind [in Finnish, *sisar hento valkoinen*], so we are then patronizing people with a puritanical moral sensibility [in Finnish, *kukkahattutäti*] who don't care about boundaries, means, or resources, but despite this we will help you. So, it was a bit...

> Interviewee 14: Or that we heal our own traumas through clients [laughter].

> Interviewee 11: There is the drama. There is no drama when we sit at the computer and document [cases]. (Interview 1)

Interviewees also talked about the Finnish TV series *Sisäilmaa* [in English, *Indoor Air*], in which Finnish activation at the frontline is represented in a carnivalized and humorous manner. Interviewees thought the representation of street-level bureaucracy was invigorating and wished that child welfare social workers could be portrayed in a similar comical manner as well. However, interviewees also reflected upon how popular culture also contains moral underpinnings within cultural assumptions — that is, what is regarded as valued and how different phenomena are portrayed. This prompted interviewees to consider whether within child welfare it is culturally appropriate to introduce comedy or humor within social work:

Interviewee 12: Does the public think we are allowed to have fun at work, is it a bit like...

Interviewee (unknown): We do tough work and...

Interviewee 12: I think all of us in [child welfare] know that is the thing, why we keep doing this job, is that we often have so much fun. But, maybe we do not have permission [to have fun].

Interviewee 15: No, not in child welfare. (Interview 1)

According to the interviewees, self-reflection upon popular culture materials could also be usefully applied during reflexive discussions held in work communities and when supervising affective work performed by social workers. Social workers could also share information and tips among their peers about good and thought-provoking movies, books, and drama series relevant to social work practice and reflect upon their interpretations together with their peers.

Popular culture enhances relationship-based practice with clients

The second theme related to participants' descriptions of where popular culture representations of social work may prove useful to enhancing relationship-based practice with clients. Interviewees identified various popular culture materials as suitable for use by social work practitioners in their daily practice. Some interviewees had used items such as fiction, music, and movies in their client work. Specifically, interviewees described popular culture materials as particularly suitable for work with adults, young people, and children. Popular culture was perceived as helpful in client encounters where thoughts and experiences related to various phenomena are mentioned, experiences are shared, and creative outlets allow social workers to get to know a client.

According to interviewees, popular culture materials could be used to clarify the social worker's role and their point of view to a client in a comprehensive manner. Popular culture materials could also be used in social work practice to explore new topics for discussion and as a means of establishing trust or dismantling mistrust. Thus, popular culture materials may help establish a common ground between a client and a social worker:

Interviewee 17: Couldn't you sometimes talk to a client if you notice that cooperating is difficult. I could say, «Well, what kind of ideas do you have about child welfare services or a social worker and what are they based on? I have a feeling that you don't trust me?» You could bring it up by saying, «This happened in *Salkkarit*» [a Finnish soap opera, in English *Secret Lives*], or something like that. To bring up the fact that it's quite a one-sided image in the media, and maybe it's not like that at all. Maybe clients could express themselves if we could find a common [popular culture] character, [laughter] through which we could dismantle that mistrust or difficulty. (Interview 1)

Thus, according to interviewees, deconstructing social work archetypes with clients may help social workers to circulate new stories about themselves and their practice (see also Hiersteiner, 1998). The challenges of these representations could be used to convince a client of a practitioner's ethical practice. In popular culture materials, a variety of phenomena can deal extensively with issues relevant to social work such as the loss of a child, migration, or taboo topics, all of which may be useful for reflection upon together with clients.

However, according to interviewees, the use of popular culture materials in client work requires time and consideration regarding for whom it is suitable. In Finland, social workers have an educational background in social science and, therefore, may need to work outside their comfort zone when using popular culture material in their practice. Some interviewees believed they would need to receive further training to do so and require familiarization with popular culture's use prior to using it in their own practice. Some interviewees, however, challenged the idea that the use of such material offers anything special, because in the end it is an examination of an interpretation and they cannot be interpreted in the wrong way. The use of popular culture materials in practice was thus described as requiring time, but also offering observations that would otherwise not be made in client work.

By contrast, according to interviewees, trust and relationship-based work is created with clients over time and within relationships. Interviewees stated that this is something that typically their employers do not understand, and instead focus on deadlines and issues detached from the clients' realities and from the issues social workers address with their clients, sometimes for years. Establishing trust requires time when forming a long-term relationship with clients, which is impossible in a context of high employee turnover and if organizational requirements remain rigid, focusing solely on deadlines. Interviewees argued that creating a relationship with a client fosters results. Thus, utilizing popular culture, for instance, may prove effective in practice. According to interviewees, relationship-based work also helps to build reciprocal relationships, where both client and social worker demonstrate their interest in one another.

> Interviewee 8: A client [of mine] liked Justin Bieber and wanted to go to Justin Bieber's concert. I could have gone to Justin Bieber's concert with my client. I would have learned a lot about the client, and the client would have learned a lot about me. Maybe the client would also have seen somehow that we share a common experience of that phenomenon, which is important to that client. Then, our relationship would become stronger, and the client would think that I am really interested in them and that I will try, in that way, I am interested in the client and building trust. So, then it is not just a tool, but it really helps to get to know the client, which is important. It's easier through things that are meaningful for a client, which you often notice when you go to talk to a child, they do something, and you just show interest in what that child is doing. (Interview 2)

The use of popular culture in client work may also require justification to a client. According to interviewees, clients expect concrete help and support in the difficult situations

for which they expect to be taken seriously. For this reason, it should be well-explained to a client what this work can achieve and how such materials can help their case. Interviewees stated that they would not use popular culture materials during a first meeting with a client to prevent feeling like a guinea pig upon which novel methods are being tested. That is, no client should experience discomfort related to the use of popular culture materials.

> Interviewee 5: We have a lot of children who are not used to expressing themselves properly in any way. And then imagine if you are told that you must throw yourself into something like this. If you think about it, it would be bad for me too if... I think I could read a book and stuff, but if someone made me act out a drama, I would immediately walk out the door.... So, you would need to clarify the benefit of this.... so you wouldn't feel like a guinea pig. (Interview 2)

Moreover, according to interviewees, the use of popular culture is not limited to client–worker interactions. Clients could also provide tips to each other on popular culture materials and share their experiences, interpretations, and thoughts with each other or during group and peer meetings.

Conclusions

To conclude, we identified two themes under which popular culture and its social work representations can be as useful for social work practitioners according to Finnish social workers interpretations.

First, popular culture can be used to enhance practitioners' self-reflection whereby social work–relevant representations can help practitioners examine the phenomenon of social work from different perspectives. In addition, popular culture materials can be used to reflect upon practitioners' emotions, varying interpretations, assumptions, epistemological standings, and actions. The reflection can also help to assess the relatedness and credibility of culturally embedded stereotypes and expectations people may have regarding social workers, such as whether it is culturally appropriate and legitimate to present child welfare workers as having fun and employing humor in or at their workplace. These representations can also be used to assess resistance to the normative nature of social workers' actions or to critically assess harmful representations between workers. An analysis of caricatures and archetypes is beneficial, although a more nuanced and complex social work representation in popular culture is more appropriate than an «child catching» image of social workers. However, the significance of fictional popular cultural representations resides more in the way they serve as sites of critical reflection rather than in how they compare to professional realities (see also Fitch & Chorazy, 2022).

Second, social work–relevant popular culture materials can be beneficial in enhancing social workers' relationship-based practice with their clients. Popular culture materials can also be used to explore new topics for discussion. More so, such materials may be

employed to establish trust and dismantle mistrust, or to finding common ground and build a relationship with a client. Thus, the deconstruction of archetypes with clients may challenge social workers to circulate new stories about themselves (Hiersteiner, 1998), or about social work clients and social work practices. Similar to Huey's (2010) results, social workers understood the potential of educating people via popular culture imagery. Popular culture materials may offer observations that would otherwise not be visible. However, the use of popular culture materials in client work requires time, training, and consideration regarding for whom it is suitable so as to avoid causing client discomfort. In particular, building trust and reciprocal relationships requires time when establishing a long-term relationship with a client, which is impossible in the context of high employee turnover and if the organizational requirements are rigid, and focus primarily on results and deadlines. In relationship-based social work practice, clients can also provide tips on popular culture to each other and share their experiences, interpretations, and thoughts with one another in settings such as group meetings.

As stated earlier, scholarship exploring the use and reception of popular culture representations in social work practice remain limited. This study attempted to address this gap. One limitation to our study is that our sample is confined to one country context and consists of a relatively small dataset with interviewees who participated in a specialized educational program. Therefore, future research should focus on a different country and different practice settings as well on the reception of various popular culture materials, such as reality and children's television programs. Future studies may also focus on the expectations and assumptions social workers have encountered based upon what their clients take from popular culture expectations and stereotypes. In addition, future studies could focus on reflections from social worker characters' misconduct as portrayed in popular culture.

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