

May 7, 2004

Paula L. Delo  
*Social Work*  
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Suite 700  
Washington, DC 20002-4241

Dear Ms. Delo:

I wish to comment on the article "Through the Eyes of Hollywood: Images of Social Workers in Film" (*Social Work*, April 2004).

The article critiques a group of movies in which social work and social workers are portrayed. However, these critiques offer little information of scientific value in assessing "the problematic issue of the public's image of social work." This statement is based on the following:

1. Movies are works of fiction that may or may not be based on facts.
2. The article is based on an analysis of 44 movies. Yet, when compared to the thousands of movies made since the advent of the motion picture industry, 44 movies seems to be a small sample upon which to draw conclusions.
3. The authors of the article omit at least nine movies which should have been included in the survey: "Body and Soul" (1947), "The Miracle Worker" (1961), "The Search" (1948), "Johnny Belinda" (1948), "Charly" (1968), "The Hospital" (1971) "Rainman" (1987), "West Side Story" (1961) and "Joe" (1970). The first movie includes a scene in which a social worker diligently tries to assist a family in crisis; the second, third, fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh movies portray non-social workers performing as social workers; and the eighth and ninth movies contain direct references to social workers.
4. As works of art, movies are open to various interpretations, all of which are subjective opinions, not scientific facts.
5. The article offers no comparative analysis of how other jobs or professions are portrayed in the movies.
6. The article does not cite any interviews with any producers, directors, or screenwriters involved in the making of the 44 movies in the survey.
7. The article does not cite any scientific poll measuring the public's opinion of how social work or social workers are portrayed in the movies.

8. The authors seem to impugn the artistic merits of the movies included in their survey. Yet a number of these movies were critically acclaimed. “Angels With Dirty Faces” was nominated for Academy Awards for Best Actor and Best Director, “A Thousand Clowns” won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor and was nominated for Best Picture, “The Pawnbroker,” which features an extraordinarily powerful performance by Rod Steiger as Sol Nazerman, won the Academy Award for Best Picture, and “Requiem for a Heavyweight” is considered to be one of the great movies about boxing. In addition, in “The Pawnbroker” and “Requiem” Geraldine Fitzgerald and Julie Harris give outstanding performances as social workers trying to ease the suffering of their tormented clients, one a concentration-camp survivor, the other a beat-up prizefighter, who are being mercilessly exploited and victimized.

Stereotyping is unfair and offensive. It distorts facts, usually for self-serving purposes. However, instead of critiquing the way social work and social workers are portrayed in a group of movies, which are works of fiction produced for profit, perhaps the authors should consider producing their own movie about social work and social workers, distribute it to movie houses and see if it sells. Because in our market-driven economy, what the consumer is willing to buy is the ultimate measure of what the public wants.

Sincerely,

Phillip W. Weiss, ACSW