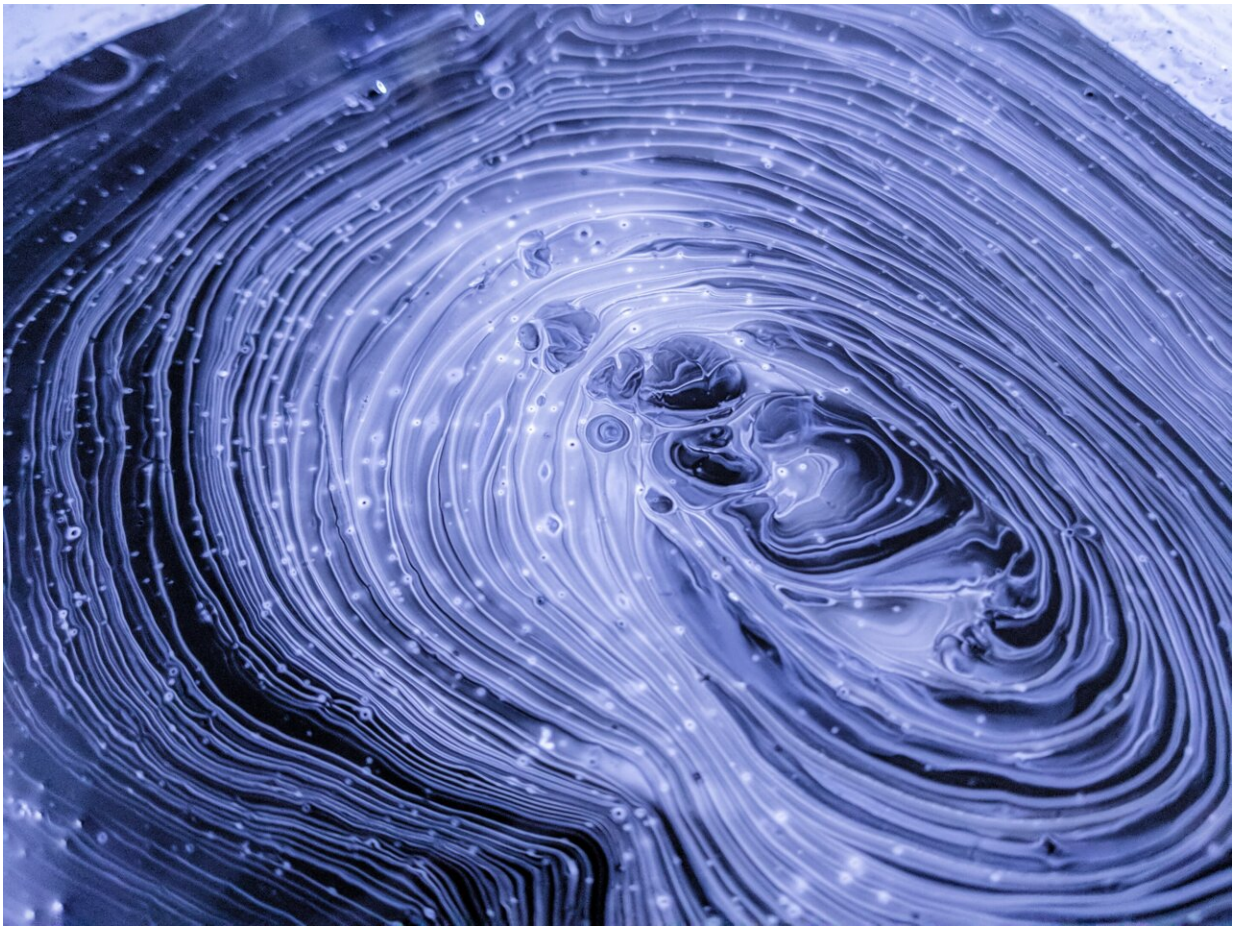


Social workers aren't incompetent child snatchers – so why are they portrayed that way?

November 7 2017, by Abyd Quinn-Aziz



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

Social workers get a bad rap when it comes to their portrayal in the media. Often, they are shown taking children from their families in a heartless and wholly inaccurate manner. This only serves to reinforce already low public opinions of anyone who works in children's services.

A [recent episode in BBC soap Eastenders](#), for example, showed a social [worker](#) arriving with two police officers at a [family](#) home, following an anonymous allegation made earlier the same day. They removed the children against their mother's wishes and placed them with one of their grandparents. Among the many inaccuracies, no one actually looked at the children's alleged injuries, their safety was not assessed, there was little discussion with their mother, and no checks were made on the place they were going to, to ensure it was safe. There was also no legal order for removing the children, which might reinforce the view that social workers can and want to just take children away from parents.

The BBC has since said that they sought the advice of social workers and police for the script, but this was [met with cynicism](#) from the profession.

Damaging confidence

There have been instances where social workers were in the wrong, but not all have made mistakes on the job. For the vast majority, this is the latest in a long line of negative and often inaccurate stereotype portrayals that are damaging how social workers are perceived by the public, and making their jobs harder as a result.

Sharon Shoesmith – director of Haringey social services at the time when [Peter Connelly, "Baby P"](#), died in August 2007 – has [written about the media furore](#) following the convictions of Connelly's killers. The effect of Connelly's death and the moral panic that ensued had a massive impact on social services nationwide, as well as villainising Shoesmith herself. Within two days of the news, The Sun newspaper had set up a

petition calling for her and the other social workers involved to be sacked, which was delivered [along with tens of thousands of letters](#) to then prime minister, Gordon Brown. It was later ruled that Shoesmith had been [unfairly dismissed](#).

The truth is that around [one in five children under the age of five](#) in England are being referred to children's services. Though the researchers behind this statistic recognised that some children do need to be protected, there is little evidence to support this level of statutory involvement. Nor is there need for the growing focus on early – and increasingly investigative – interventions, alongside [increases in the removal](#) of children from their families.

All this does is create levels of suspicion and fear of social workers, especially for families in the most deprived areas. Studies have found that children in deprived neighbourhoods are [more than 11 times more likely](#) to be on the child protection register, and 12 times more likely to be "looked after" by the state. But this is not because these families are abusing their children, nor because social workers wrongly believe they are unable to do so. Rather, poverty is said to be "[part of the picture of harm](#)".

Realistic relationships

There are clear reasons why it is easy for the public to believe negative portrayals of social workers – but the few do not represent the many in this case. So what can be done to change public perception?

Revisiting the origins of [social work](#), it was former [prime minister](#) Clement Atlee, whose post-war government brought the welfare state into being. Atlee – who had previously been a social worker and social work lecturer – outlined a profession of principles in his [1920 book The Social Worker](#). Though nearly 100 years old, some ideals still remain

applicable today.

Atlee suggested that social work should be radical, relationship based, realistic and reciprocal. He believed it should be about looking for the root causes behind problems and working with families, while carrying out thorough, realistic analyses. Atlee suggested that if social workers were prepared to listen and learn they would gain a great deal.

These are not just some ideal principles, written by an academic or spouted by a politician. This is how social workers do their jobs today. They are there to help families, not to tear them apart. It is never an easy task to split a family and it is only done when it is believed to be in the child's best interests.

We cannot ignore cases like that of Peter Connelly, or indeed [murdered eight-year-old Victoria Climbié](#), but the danger is in missing out on the many stories of [children](#) and families being helped and supported through difficult times. Portraying social workers as incompetent child snatchers rather than useful sources of support and help will only stop people accepting help in what could be their most pressing time of need.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Social workers aren't incompetent child snatchers – so why are they portrayed that way? (2017, November 7) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-11-social-workers-incompetent-child-snatchers.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.