

“Social Workers Should Be Required to Watch this Episode”

Social Media Perceptions of Television Portrayals of Fictional CPS Workers

Jonina Anderson-Lopez*, Allison Budaj**, Erin E. Gilles***

* Department of General Education, Joyce University, Draper, UT, USA
E-mail: andersonlope[at]usf.edu

** Department of General Education, Joyce University, Draper, UT, USA
E-mail: allison.budaj[at]joyce.edu

*** Department of Communication and Media, University of Southern Indiana, Evansville, IN, USA
E-mail: eegilles[at]usi.edu

Child Protective Services (CPS) workers appear in television plotlines across every fiction genre, and these depictions are often quite unfavourable. Customer engagement behaviours (CEBs), or what viewers say in online forums or on social media influence how other viewers perceive CPS workers. This interconnectivity is examined here through the framework of CEBs and Social TV using case studies from four popular programs: *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)*, *Shameless*, *Law and Order: SVU (SVU)*, and *The Sandman*. These case studies were compared for accuracy against observations given by a former Child Protective Investigator, whose feedback indicated that the realistic programs (*SVU* and *Shameless*), while being overly dramatised, had more authentic and balanced CPS portrayals than the fantasy programs (*BtVS* and *The Sandman*). Common themes from the audience in the CEBs are: CPS workers are overworked, underpaid, and too bureaucratic; greed motivates some families to foster or adopt children; and that the system of protective services is broken.

Keywords: CPS worker, social media, television, social TV, CEBs, TV portrayals

Address for correspondence: Jonina Anderson-Lopez, e-mail: andersonlope[at]usf.edu.

Article received on 5 February 2024. Article accepted on 11 August 2024.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Funding: The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

Introduction

The primary role of CPS workers in the USA is often seen as taking or removing children. Some parents believe that CPS workers are “bad because they snatch the kids” (Survey interviews as cited in Hicks, 2016, p. 22). Apart from the UK series *Disarmed* (2016) and the US cartoon *Ugly Americans* (2010–2012), there are not many recent fictional series in the USA that deliver positive associations of CPS workers; in contrast to police officers (*The Rookie* 2018 – present), teachers (*Abbot Elementary* 2021 – present), and first responders (*9-1-1* 2018 – present). Due to the absence of positive or even realistic on-screen representation, the perception of CPS workers in social media spaces may reflect poorly. Describing it as *Social TV*, Teurlings (2018) notes how the convergence of social media and television has evolved in such a way that amateur critiques of television are increasingly common, and are sometimes taken seriously by other fans and TV creatives. Viswanathan et al. (2018) explain how such *customer engagement behaviours* (CEBs), or what viewers choose to say in public online forums, may influence how other viewers see and perceive the brand, in this case, a TV series. When viewers see a negative (or inaccurate) portrayal of a CPS worker on TV, they may then criticise the CPS profession based on that limited portrayal. Their posts may impact other users’ perception of CPS workers, possibly leading to a cyclical situation in which CPS characters are typecast. Thus, the interconnectivity between fictional TV portrayals and social media is of interest to the researchers of this article, through the theoretical framework of CEBs and Social TV. To further assess the perception of TV CPS workers in the context of social media posts, this paper will review case studies from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)*, *Shameless*, *Law & Order: SVU (SVU)*, and *The Sandman*. To assess the accuracy of the portrayal, each case study will conclude with brief observations of the CPS television portrayal from a former Child Protective Investigator (CPI).

Literature review

This thematic literature review will examine CPS terminology, then explore the CPS worker media perceptions and theoretical basis for this work.

Social worker and CPS worker

Although the public may consider the terms *social worker*, *case worker* and *CPS worker* to be interchangeable, they are not. There are different types of social workers who may work in mental health facilities, non-profit organisations, and county or municipal organisations. In fact, “about one out of five of the 642,000 social workers in the United States in 2008 worked in the medical and public health field” (Wright, 2010), some of whom work variously with children, the elderly, women or other groups. It is not always

true that social workers interact on behalf of child welfare (due to the varied nature of their profession), so this article will refer to Child Protective Services (CPS) workers in reference to perceptions and case studies throughout. CPS workers are designated to work directly with families with children. Schreiber et al. (2013) clarify the way in which CPS workers collaborate with caregivers to find the best solution for child welfare.

Cause of perceptions

Certain factors may determine the public perception of CPS workers. Frank Wang (2008) explains how being a social worker is to “be positioned at the margins” (p. 497). CPS workers are most often characterised as female, as *workers* (as opposed to *career professionals*), who lack education and are invasive (Olin, 2013; Tirado, 2006; Schreiber, 2013). It is perhaps for this reason certain US state or county CPS organisations prefer to designate their workers as Child Protective Investigators (CPI), side-stepping the connotations around *worker*. Another major factor behind public opinion is based on the CPS client group. CPS workers are not called into action because of *caretaker requests*, instead CPS workers receive tip-offs through a hotline network about a supposed lack of caregiving for children in particular households, which then triggers formal investigations. This leads to the idea that CPS workers deal with *bad* caregivers or *lowly* clients, producing a perception of *guilt-by-association* (Hicks, 2016; Tirado, 2006).

While attitudes towards CPS workers began to improve after 2004, many members of the public will still never encounter a CPS worker in their lifetime. For this reason, “the mass media became a major means of shaping the public’s impressions of social work” (Reid & Misener, 2001, p. 194). Thus, news and other media may influence audience impressions of CPS roles.

Social media campaigns from organisations

In an effort to cultivate the CPS image, national and local social media campaigns have taken place, such as the ongoing public education campaign launched by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in early 2005 (Zugazaga et al., 2006, p. 634). On the NASW website, a National Survey by Ipsos (2023) found that “80 percent of Americans have a favorable opinion of Social Workers” and that “81 percent of those who have interacted with a social worker say a member of the profession improved their situation or that of a family member”. Much of the promotion from NASW, however, focuses on *social work* rather than *CPS workers*.

The Child Welfare Information Gateway (s. a.) provides resources pertinent to child safety, such as the guide *Using Social Media to Engage Families*, which offers national and local programs suggestions on the development of social media plans. In 2018, the statistics in this guide did not take TikTok or Reddit into account.

Social media perceptions

On TikTok, users engage with families using ideas similar to those suggested in *Using Social Media to Engage Families* (2018). Individual posts and accounts dubbed as *CPS workers* on TikTok gain millions of views. For instance, user Destrieo (2021), shares “Things I don’t care about as a CPS SW,” e.g. dirty dishes in the sink, or kids sharing a bedroom. As with X (formerly Twitter) and Reddit, TikTok posts about CPS workers being *inappropriate* or *creating false reports* do circulate. Still, TikTok may also provide space for CPS workers to showcase humour, perhaps humanising their profession. However, when sharing details on social media about clients, CPS workers should be aware of privacy concerns and not divulge too much, as was the case in 2017 when a CPI was fired after posting client details on Reddit (Varn, 2019).

Theoretical approach to research

The interplay between television and social media is of interest to this study, particularly as some viewers use both simultaneously. If Americans spend at least 2.9 hours a day and over half their leisure time consuming television, as Nancy Scanlan and Shannon Hanshaw (2022) conclude, viewers could establish connections between their realities and the stories told on television. Wohn and Na (2011) believe that, even as television or any kind of technology has been categorised as *alienating* or *isolating* in past studies, social media has created a way for users to create a new type of community when watching television (para. 14). The researchers collected more than 1,000 tweets during live airing of TV events, ultimately determining that many users did not respond to one another. Wohn and Na (2011) stated that “social media is recreating a pseudo ‘group viewing’ experience of television” (para. 60). These findings support the notion that social media in response to television creates a false sense of community.

Auverset and Billings (2016) described simultaneous tweeting and TV viewing as *Social TV*, in which social media platforms like X “enable viewers to participate in a shared, collective experience” (p. 3). Such interactive measures were taken by the producers of *The Walking Dead* (*TWD*) to engage the audience in new ways during the airing of each episode (Auverset & Billings, 2016). In contrast to parasocial relationships, the promotional moves for *TWD* could constitute *technoprosociality*, which Pasztor and Korn (2015) describe as “the integration of social media technology to maximize audience engagement and interpersonal relationship development between celebrities and fans” (p. 186). Viewers may wish to interpret scenes or express personal opinions, but to a more abstract audience. Some viewers seemed interested in “like-minded *The Walking Dead* fans who might also be engaged in Social TV during an episode premiere” (Auverset & Billings, 2016, p. 10). The technoprosociality of *TWD* viewers illustrates a new mode of TV and social media interaction.

With these modes, Teurlings (2018) writes about the new types of TV critics that have emerged through social media, especially concerning recaps. Before social media, Teurlings contends, TV critics were not as influential, with TV criticism most commonly occurring through word of mouth. Social media created a one-way interactive discourse because “this is a space in which media-based critics, the public and academic critics can engage equally” (Rixon, 2013, pp. 397–398). Critics can react in different ways: before or after an episode airs, following a recap, or with cultural critiques of themes and characters. Teurlings (2018) believes:

“the user comments under these recaps offer scholars an insight into how viewers with a specific interest in TV (characterizing them as fans might be an overstatement) react to, reflect upon, and discuss TV” (p. 210).

Teurlings (2018) highlights Graeme Turner’s use of the *demotic turn*, which positions media as a space for dynamic audience participation rather than its former status as passively consumed by its viewers. Mostly, Teurlings analyses the way in which the media has been democratised, creating a new space for amateur critics. By this, he explains, “contemporary television criticism is a form of shared knowledge that functions like language, that is, as a socially-produced commons” (Teurlings, 2018, p. 212). In building online language, customers are creating new ways to interpret content.

Viswanathan et al. (2018) conducted a study of the interrelationships between cable TV and X, using CEBs as a theoretical underpinning to determine how customer engagement via TV and social media may be connected. If the CEB is negative, it will most likely generate a negative reaction and vice versa. Viswanathan et al. (2018) shares how their “framework acknowledges that actors engaging in CEBs can, in turn, be co-creators of other customers’ engagement” (p. 382). Things like word of mouth and trust are impacted by CEBs.

Research questions

RQ 1: How are TV CPS workers portrayed?

RQ 1.1: In what ways were the portrayals negative, neutral, or positive?

RQ 1.2: How did the CPS worker interact with other characters?

RQ 1.2: How did the CPS worker treat children and families?

RQ 2: What types of media posts did viewers share about the portrayal of the TV CPS worker?

RQ 3: What connections can be drawn between the case studies and social media posts?

RQ 4: What does it mean that several popular TV portrayals are by women?

The first two questions will be answered through the review of each case study, while the last two will be answered in the discussion section of this article.

Research methods

To review interconnectivity of CPS worker perceptions, different forms of media were reviewed. The research focus includes a three-fold approach: 1. four case studies of CPS worker television depictions were analysed; 2. impressions of the portrayals were analysed by a former, professional social worker; and 3. audience feedback from web forums and social media sites were gathered and coded. The purpose of this research is to review inaccuracies in the TV depictions, while also identifying interconnectivity between the points of focus listed above.

The research is significant because the wider public may never encounter a CPS worker, and limited media *encounters* with the CPS may engender real-world consequences. In Norway, a study from Vis et al. (2022) found that when children or parents do not trust the CPS, they may defer much-needed services. Carmona (2011) examines how

“the recruitment and retention of workers, as well as funding granted to the field of social work, have been shown to be directly influenced by the mass media and its portrayal of the social work profession” (p. 24).

The possibility of low morale among workers and low confidence from the public could also be problematic.

As previously discussed, media depictions of CPS workers may impact perceptions. These perceptions can change over time, and that is why the four case studies will be reviewed chronologically. Tirado (2006) cites “by the mid-1920s the media, in the form of advertising, radio, and the movies, formalized unflattering characterizations of social workers” (p. 5). In television shows, such as *Norm* (1999–2001), social workers can be mischaracterised as lazy or incompetent, leading to protests from some viewers (Tirado, 2006). Other shows, like *Judging Amy* (1995–2005), depict social workers as hardworking and compassionate. TV series like *Judging Amy* and *Norm* contain images that viewers may conflate with actual CPS workers and their duties.

The list in Table 1 was compiled by researching IMDb lists, Reddit threads, and discussion posts about social workers and TV. Then, the perception of the social worker was cross-referenced with critical articles and Reddit or X mentions about the character. This thematic assessment helped categorise each fictional CPS or Social Worker into three possible viewer perceptions: “Neutral”, “Mostly Positive”, and “Mostly Negative”.

Most portrayals were identified on IMDb.com with the moniker “Social Worker”, except for a few mentions of “Caseworker”. Many of these TV social workers dealt with children’s welfare directly, despite there being many types of social workers (as noted in the literature review). So, in the case of TV portrayals, the title *social worker* may correlate with the role of CPS worker; however, due to the public’s lack of knowledge of the different roles and definitions of social workers, it may have been easier for TV creatives to label all types of social workers, caseworkers, and CPS workers simply as

social workers. This type of labelling may be indicative of the fact that not all series that feature a social worker (or similar) consult with real social workers (Wright, 2010).

Table 1 displays a variety of perceptions of CPS worker portrayals on TV. From the medical drama, *ER* (1994–2009), several social workers made appearances over the years it aired, and many of those portrayals were positive or neutral. Other positive portrayals include characters like Maxine Gray of *Judging Amy* (1995–2005) and Linda from *This Is Us* (2016–2022). Some portrayals on the list did not necessarily interact directly with children but the character was considered by viewers to be likable, such as Ducasse from *Jessica Jones* (2015–2019). Overall, Table 1 displays: 6 Mostly Negative Portrayals, 7 Mostly Positive Portrayals, and 4 Neutral Portrayals.

In part due to discrepancies in perceptions of characters across several media formats, the case studies conclude with observations from Jason Anderson, a former CPI Supervisor. Anderson was a CPI in 2015, then a CPI Supervisor (2021–2023) for the Pinellas County Sheriff’s Office. As a former professional earning CPS-related awards and teaching CPS training seminars, he is well-positioned to provide *expert judgement assessment* of the case studies. Almenara and Cejudo (2013) believe expert judgement assessment involves a group of experts relaying their opinion or evaluation and can “be particularly useful for determining knowledge about difficult, complex, novel, or understudied topics” (p. 14). Although the assessment for this research only involves one expert, Anderson compares his knowledge of Florida CPI policies in contrast with the TV portrayals of the CPS.

Altogether, the quantitative methods include the sampling of CEBs on social media sites, Table 1 analysis, compiled with varied CPS worker TV representations. All of these points allowed the researchers of this article to position the TV portrayals of CPS workers as well-used tropes and therefore worthy of study.

Rationale

The theoretical basis of this research is connected to CEBs and Social TV, as outlined in the literature review. This article categorises CEBs as online viewer comments, which are reviewed with a corresponding brand (episode), and interrelate with Social TV. As in the Auverset and Billings (2016) study, viewers may respond on social media platforms having watched TV episodes, creating a sense of community and engagement about CPS portrayals. If, as Klein (2011) posits, entertainment programming on television “does not function as mere amusement for viewers but [as] a site through which contemporary social issues may be considered and negotiated” after which social workers themselves are left to correct perceptions and manage the resultant public relations problems (p. 905). To examine the interplay between CEBs and Social TV, episodes from four TV series were assessed as case studies:

- *BtVS* (2002)
- *Shameless* (2013)
- *SVU* (2015)
- *The Sandman* (2022)

The four case studies were popular shows in different ways, encompass different points in time in US culture, and are accessible via different mediums (network, premium paid services or streaming). Thus, they may sustain varied portrayals of CPS workers. Moreover, their popularity meant that cross-referencing the portrayals with social media posts was easier than for other potential case studies. For example, *Norm* and *Ugly Americans* were two series starring social workers; however, both series had short runs (two or three seasons) due to cancellations or not being picked up for additional seasons. Their lack of popularity probably explains why finding social media posts about their portrayals of CPS workers in these two series was less productive. As of May 2024, the *Ugly Americans* page on Reddit features 115 members and the *Norm* Reddit page features 812 members. In contrast, the *BtVS* and *Shameless* Reddit pages each feature over 130,000 members. Reddit allows for discussion of several topics (e.g. particular episodes), an abundance of information that helped in assessing perspectives on CPS workers as reflected in popular TV series.

Two fantasy series (*BtVS* and *The Sandman*) and two drama series (*Shameless* and *SVU*) were evaluated. Despite the differences in genre, each series pays specific attention to family dynamics as a central part of storylines in the chosen episodes. While some of the storylines in *BtVS* and *The Sandman* are fantastical, the family dynamics are presented realistically and are therefore useful units for analysis. The depiction of the family, as noted by Messina (2019),

“not only plays a significant role in predicting [viewer] identification, but it is an aspect that should be considered as important when evaluating efforts to educate and persuade audiences through entertainment programming” (p. 100).

Similarly, Piotrowska (2018) analysed music in TV series of different genres because the primary objective was the motif of music and patterns across certain episodes. This research similarly focused on a motif across particular episodes, that is, portrayals of CPS workers as part of the main storyline. Specific episodes from each case study were chosen because the characters deal directly with children’s welfare, correlating with the type of CPS workers of interest to this research. If the CPS worker was featured across two episodes (as was the case for *Shameless* and *The Sandman*), both episodes and corresponding social media posts were assessed. The researchers observed the selected episodes several times, taking detailed notes, to answer RQ 1. Once these observations were recorded, online searches across several search engines were conducted for social media and fan forum posts using relevant keyword pairings (i.e. program titles, episode titles, actor names, CPS, DCFS, DCS, social workers).

The researchers then gathered online sentiment through social media posts about the particular episodes, with a focus on mentions of the CPS worker portrayals. Data collection continued until saturation or information redundancy occurred and no new themes emerged from the data (Alam, 2021). The researchers digitally compiled relevant posts to answer RQ 2 about viewer sentiment towards the CPS worker in the episode, and exemplars were chosen for inclusion that represented the general trends in viewer

opinion. The language of the commenters was prioritised, and no changes were made to any of the quoted material. More specifically, to avoid any loss or change of meaning in the language of our online posts, we have elected not to edit the original posts for grammar, spelling, or structure. While each program section lists the sources of the social media user comments, authors of specific comments were anonymised and separated from the sites on which they were posted to maintain privacy. This also neutralises any bias or judgment formed while reading a user’s screen name (Pal & Counts, 2011). The last step in gathering research was observation of each CPS worker portrayal (four workers portrayed across 6 episodes from different series) by a former CPI to compare them with realistic practices and relevant guidelines governing the procedures within their state of practice, Florida. Each author was the primary researcher for a particular program, with one author evaluating two programs. However, the other authors read and commented on each section adding feedback and helping to organise and assess the data. Due to this division of labour, formal interrater reliability was not calculated, but all data and findings were evaluated by all of the researchers.

Case studies

The following case studies reviewed portrayals of CPS workers on US television shows (*Buffy the Vampire Slayer [BtVS]*, *Shameless*, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit [SVU]*, and *The Sandman*), and CEBs from online viewer comments. Public perceptions change over time, so the case studies are reviewed chronologically. Additionally, the case studies will conclude with observations from former CPI, Jason Anderson.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BtVS)

BtVS (Whedon, 1997–2003) is a fantasy-themed drama from the WB and later UPN. The series focuses on vampire-slayer Buffy Summers (Sarah Michelle Gellar). In “Buffy vs. Dracula” (S5E1), Buffy’s sister Dawn (Michelle Trachtenberg) is introduced by magical forces. After their mother’s death, Buffy becomes Dawn’s caregiver. Dawn struggles with many issues, including abandonment and kleptomania.

In “Gone” (S6E11), Social Services worker Doris Kroeger (Susan Ruttan) arrives. The house seems chaotic, and Buffy mixes up the appointment day, appearing irresponsible. Dawn sports an arm sling after the car accident in “Wrecked” (S6E10). Doris is bright and friendly, despite the mix-up about days. Dawn leaves for school, prompting Doris to comment, “A little bit on the tardy side, isn’t she?” (Fury, 2002, 0:08:10). Buffy apologises for the messy house, seeming surprised to see Spike (James Marsters), her current paramour. Buffy asks Spike to leave, and Doris refers to him as her boyfriend, which Buffy denies. Spike tells Doris, “Buffy’s a great mom. She takes good care of her little sis. Like, um, when Dawn was hanging out too much in my crypt, Buffy put a right stop to it” (0:08:58). Buffy tells Doris he had used the slang term “crib”. Spike leaves, with Buffy

confirming that she and Dawn live alone. Then her roommate, Willow (Allyson Hannigan) can be heard calling. Doris asks if she lives with another woman to which Buffy stammers that it is “not a gay thing”, although Willow is her lesbian roommate (0:10:05).

Doris notices Willow’s dried herbs, which resemble marijuana. Buffy assures her: “It’s ‘magic’ weed. It’s not mine” (0:10:17). Doris says she has seen enough. When Buffy says it has been a bad time lately, Doris replies:

“Your sister’s grades have fallen sharply in the last year, due in large part to her frequent absences and lateness. But my interest is in Dawn’s welfare and the stability of her home life, something I’m just not convinced an unemployed young woman like yourself can provide” (0:10:36).

Doris leaves, informing Buffy she will recommend immediate probation, potentially stripping Buffy of guardianship if things do not improve.

Later, Buffy is hit by an invisibility ray gun and visits DCFS to play pranks on Doris. Buffy repeatedly moves Doris’ coffee mug while whispering “Kill, Doris, kill everyone” (0:21:16). Doris thinks she is hearing voices. Her boss offers her the day off and takes her off Buffy’s case. He promises a new interview will be conducted by a new CPS worker the following day. There are no new scenes with the replacement CPS worker, but it can be assumed, the meeting was satisfactory.

Audience feedback on the CPS plotline in BtVS

Although this program aired over 20 years ago, active users still comment on characters and plotlines via social media and forums. This demonstrates the longevity of the program and the depth of the fandom. Comments were gathered from Reddit, Buffy-Boards.com, and The A.V. Club. Audience feedback centres around three themes: 1. criticism of Buffy; 2. criticism of the CPS worker; and 3. commentary about social work/the CPS.

Comments critical of Buffy Summers

This episode seemed to be polarising for viewers. One social media poster called Buffy’s actions “disgraceful” (*BtVS* Viewer 1, 2021), while on another platform one wrote: “Like the narrative shouldn’t have demonized the social worker as much as it did, but Buffy’s actions are supposed to be uncomfortable. Dawn and Spike both call her out on it” (*BtVS* Viewer 2, 2021). Several viewers commented that Buffy’s actions in making Doris seem mentally unstable were extreme. Another comment (*BtVS* Viewer 3, 2016) added: “Dawn is almost taken away by CPS, so Buffy drives an innocent woman insane (seriously the real villain here is Buffy).” Another poster on social media agreed: “i find it twisted and disturbing; Buffy invisible, she gaslights that social worker into making her look insane just because she was right about Buffy being an unfit parent who was neglectful of Dawn” (*BtVS* Viewer 4, 2021).

During Season 6, there is a recurring story line about Buffy’s depression. Many users referred to Buffy’s emotional state when discussing the CPS worker. For instance, as one viewer wrote online: “Wrong what Buffy did to the social worker [...], but she did not know Dawns [sic] guardian needed psychological help” (*BtVS* Viewer 5, 2017).

Comments critical of the social worker

Many viewers criticised Doris. One social media user commented:

“the social worker barely went into the house and talked to Buffy [...] I think dawn needed therapy more than being taken away from her family. A good social worker would have set that up and actually talked to Dawn in this situation” (*BtVS* Viewer 6, 2021).

In some cases, viewers referenced their expertise of the system. Someone who indicated that they worked in social services posted:

“Doris is a terrible social worker, she’s very damaging to what people believe social workers are all about – she is why people don’t ask for help as they assume it will mean their children get taken away” (*BtVS* Viewer 7, 2021).

They added Doris’ behaviour is inconsistent with home-visit conduct:

“You can’t just say ‘I’ve seen enough’ without giving the parent any chance to discuss their situation and how they may possibly need your support...BAD social work practice!”

Another commenter, who identified themselves as a social worker, said Doris’ visit was “Definitely not a trauma-informed or family systems-centered approach” (*BtVS* Viewer 8, 2022). One forum comment referred to Doris as too focused on the bureaucracy of social work, “we saw Doris in the office: not resolving important issues in the field but being a bureaucrat” (*BtVS* Viewer 9, 2017). Yet, another user replied to defend Doris:

“Doris wasn’t being a bureaucrat. She would’ve had to go back to the office to write up her notes... was also consulting with a colleague over the case eg making sure the right outcome was reached without bias” (*BtVS* Viewer 10, 2017).

These comments indicate a lack of consensus about what a CPS worker’s job entails.

Comments about social work/CPS workers

The online comments support how CPS stereotypes may be reinforced through media exposure. One user wrote

“isn’t that sometimes the way actual social workers are in the system we have here in America? Not judging but have heard or read stories that teenagers do not always get listened to sometimes in the child welfare system” (*BtVS* Viewer 11, 2022).

BtVS Viewer 8 (2022) agreed: “unfortunately that character was such a trope and that just keeps getting perpetuated in the media”.

Comparing this episode’s plotline to reality, one commenter stated: “In real life they want kids to stay with their families as much as possible, and from what I’ve heard it’s hard to get kids taken away even in pretty bad situations” (*BtVS* Viewer 12, 2022). Buffy receiving a home visit the next day was also considered unrealistic: “Considering the backlog of cases they probably have in Sunnydale, it may be safe to assume that Buffy doesn’t get another visit until over a year later” (*BtVS* Viewer 13, 2011). This comment supports the perception of social workers as being overburdened with heavy caseloads.

Altogether, these comments illustrate the variety of perceptions held by the public about social workers. In some cases, viewers elected to take sides on the issue, while others acknowledged the complexity. There was consensus about CPS workers and the system being broken, even in the fictional town of Sunnydale.

Observations from a former CPI

A departure from CPI standards is how this would be a truancy issue rather than a CPS complaint. Likewise, Dawn is perhaps too old to be held liable for truancy. The initial reason for the ongoing investigation (why the social worker was scheduled in the first place) was not made clear, and the social worker did not indicate why she was at the Summers’ home. The interview between the caregiver and CPS lasted minutes and wasn’t substantive and would not have ceased due to the discovery of drugs. Also, the CPS worker would have asked everyone present to stay (which did not happen), and then would’ve interviewed the child (Dawn) separately first. The need for an investigation seemed tenuous, but it was accurate that the investigation would move to another CPS worker (after Doris was discredited).

Shameless

An American adaptation of a British dramedy, Showtime’s series *Shameless* (2011–2021) presents a gritty narrative about the Gallagher family from Chicago’s South Side. This analysis will focus on the portrayal of Illinois Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) caseworkers in the third season.

In “The Sins of My Caretaker” (S3E5), the chaos leading to the DCFS visit is plentiful. After receiving instructions not to sit on “cushions, carpets, anything foam or porous”, and not to scream if “you feel something crawling on you”, DCFS caseworker Brittany Sturgess (Keiko Agena) enters the Gallagher household.

In the following episode, “Cascading Failures” (S5E6), Brittany leads the Gallagher children out of the house while eldest sister Fiona (Emmy Rossum) requests their placements. Based on a pep talk from another DCFS worker just before entering the household, Brittany is new to her position. Brittany also seems adamant about the responsibility of ensuring that the Gallagher clan is securely placed. This time, however, sons Philip aka “Lip” (Jeremy Allen White) and Ian (Cameron Monaghan) are placed in a group home due to their age. In contrast, Carl (Ethan Cutkosky) and Liam (Blake Alexander Johnson, Brenden Sims, and Christian Isaiah), are placed together. This leaves Debbie (Emma Kenney) alone in the custody of Mama Kamala (Juanita Jennings), who is already fostering several children. Visiting the DCFS office, Fiona listens as Brittany explains the “turnover rate in our field is quite high” (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013, 0:11:08). Brittany is still reluctant to give up the children’s information, commenting about the previous caseworker’s (Marilyn), “clear violation” (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013, 0:11:18). Fiona makes her final attempt:

“I know you think you’re helping but as someone who has been in and out of the system their whole life, I can tell you it’s a nightmare. These kids have a big sister who loves them and I just want to make sure they’re okay. So give me something, Brittany. I mean, break a goddamn rule” (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013, 0:11:34).

Relenting, Brittany reveals information about Ian and Lip. Before leaving, Fiona pitches an idea about finding a family willing to take all the kids so they could be placed together, a thought Brittany agrees would work in theory.

However, Fiona’s plan for best friend Veronica “Vee” Fisher (Shanola Hampton) to temporarily adopt the Gallagher clan leads nowhere, as shown in a flashback with CPS worker Andrea (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013). Andrea’s (Chris Burns) contrasting personality grants a different social worker dynamic. Mimicking air quotes around the word *supervision*, Andrea explains to Vee how the quality of their care is still pending investigation. A far cry from Brittany (slender and timid), Andrea, a large, white woman who speaks with what one viewer on X deems a “crazy blaccent”, boldly towers over Vee, even when Vee pushes back about the quality of her care (*Shameless* Viewer 9, 2023).

Later, Fiona again visits Brittany to ensure their father, Frank (William H. Macy) has filed the necessary paperwork. Brittany compliments Fiona’s capabilities as big sister before revealing an anonymous phone call to DCFS. Fiona questions the fairness of someone remaining anonymous after essentially ruining their lives (Borstein & Hemingway, 2013, 0:52:21). Then Brittany breaks another rule, allowing Fiona to discover that the anonymous tipster is Frank.

Audience feedback on the CPS plotline in Shameless

Despite the series finale in 2021, online discussions for *Shameless* continue. According to Reddit, “Sins of My Caretaker” ranks as one of the top 10 episodes of the entire series (Norman, 2022). Similar to the previous case study, viewer comments were gathered

from Reddit, X, and TikTok. The audience feedback about these two episodes focused on primary themes: 1. viewer experiences with DCFS; and 2. comments about the DCFS workers.

Viewer experiences with CPS

Those identifying as social workers or who have experience of social work feel a connection with the series, as this post from one viewer exemplified: “Yesterday a visit with a social worker was like entering an episode of *Shameless*. Three generations & eight people in a small council house. Each with needs as huge as the next – and such strength” (*Shameless* Viewer 1, 2022).

One viewer noted online: “[w]atching the social worker talk to the kids about where they’re being placed in #Shameless is like my real life nightmare for my kiddos...” (*Shameless* Viewer 2, 2013). Another viewer warned, “[i]f anyone watches #Shameless I recommend you not watch it with family. Especially parents and the ‘Cascading Failures’ episode” (*Shameless* Viewer 3, 2013). These two posts demonstrate *Shameless* presents a challenging image of the CPS, and a challenging narrative for parents to watch.

Viewers debate Frank wanting to be a father and how the children could return home. As *Shameless* Viewer 4 (2022) illustrated:

*“Lip and Ian make it very clear that they have been through this before [...] Which is *common* [...] The implication in season three is that they have always been able to get the kids back – [...] Also, there’s absolutely no guarantee they’d have been taken away – remember what the DFS worker walks in on. There’s plenty of evidence in dialogue that they’ve gotten home visits before and the Gallaghers are little con artists in the early seasons...”*

Some watching the series struggle to separate work from fiction, as one comment attested: “can’t turn of[f] the #socialwork brain on my off time [...] I want to be Frank’s (from *Shameless*) case coordinator. Or his kids” (*Shameless* Viewer 5, 2022). Still, others might learn more about the challenges both those in the system and those working on behalf of the system face daily. While not everyone who watches a show like *Shameless* has encountered social work directly, the story offers opportunities for empathy.

Comments about the social workers

The commentary surrounding Brittany and Andrea differs in appreciation. For Brittany, comments on social media range from commending character development to simple reactions such as “That social worker” with a heart emoji (*Shameless* Viewers 6 & 7, 2022). Another comment acknowledged Brittany helping Fiona: “...as much as she could knowing she could lose her job” (*Shameless* Viewer 8, 2023). This may be in reference to her divulging placement information or allowing Fiona access to the anonymous call.

As the viewer posts indicate, the CPS worker Brittany came over as sympathetic. Scanlan and Hanshaw (2022) are quick to remind us how “media carries messages about social interactions and about the nature and values of groups in the society that can influence attitudes, values, and actions among its viewers” (p. 6). The show’s ability to present likable characters, despite their flaws, demonstrates the power of constructing figures with whom the audience can identify.

Observations from a former CPI

Contrary to what is depicted in this episode, it is against protocol for a CPS worker to enter a home without adult permission due to liability issues. Later, the CPS worker discusses a “petition to reinstate custody”, but in Florida, a client would not file because the State would file for them. The CPS worker discussed placement ideas with Fiona so the kids would be placed together – but this would be happening anyway. It was inaccurate for Fiona to sneak kids’ items in foster care – this would have happened before the kids were placed so they would be less ill at ease. When Fiona inquired about the paperwork filed by Frank, a CPS worker would not handle it because a case management worker would follow up. Altogether, other depictions of this particular CPS worker are plausible, such as the comment about high turnover rates, the older kids being placed in group homes, trying to place all the children together, and interacting with a case supervisor before an interview.

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)

SVU is an NBC television show that has been on air since 1999 and is still ongoing. Much like the original *Law & Order* (1990–present), *SVU* purports to depict situations based on actual events. In *SVU*, special cases are reviewed when a sexual crime is involved. In a slight departure (not the first or last), “Institutional Fail” (S17E4) features crimes of child neglect. For this section, two CPS workers will be analysed: caseworker Keith Musio (John Magaro) and supervisor Janette Grayson (Whoopi Goldberg).

Bruno Ozuna (Issam Mkaiki) wanders NYC after being left alone. Sergeant Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) and her team interview Bruno and neighbours about the mother’s (Jessica Pimental) whereabouts. Ozuna’s DCFS caseworker, Musio, is unresponsive to the SVU’s requests for Ozuna case details.

At the DCFS office, Benson’s team witnesses an irate parent cursing at a social worker. Grayson motions to a nearby officer to escort the parent out. To Benson, Grayson remarks: “Welcome to the jungle” (Mitchell, 2015, 8:07). Musio retrieves the Ozuna family case file, asking if Bruno’s okay. Benson’s partner suggests Musio watch the news to which he replies: “With this job, I barely have time to take a piss” (8:57). He had also sworn when he visited the Ozuna’s a few weeks previously, Bruno and older sister, Keisha Houston, were fine.

Later, Keisha is found unconscious locked in a dog cage. Although she is rushed to the hospital, she does not survive. A detective inquires how Keisha has seemed a few weeks previously to which Musio claims it is hard to remember because there are at least nine visits a day.

After reviewing Musio's files, the detectives discuss his caseload increase from 30 to 47. His quality of work had declined in what the detectives call "a losing battle" (Mitchell, 2015, 10:15). Several of his later reports were scanned in after Keisha's death, conflicting with court dates or other family visits. Musio is seen placing flowers at a marker for Keisha. He is then arrested for manslaughter due to a lack of family visits to the Ozuna's. Grayson and Deputy Commissioner Matt Sheridan (Josh Mercantel) are also arrested. Musio confesses to falsifying reports for himself and other staff under the supervision of Grayson and Sheridan. He alleges Grayson had warned him to stop offering so many services to clients because "this is casework, not social work" (27:32). Musio laments how Keisha's death will haunt him.

On the stand, Musio testifies that he had been put on a probationary period until he started falsifying reports. Later, Grayson is on the stand and initially appears calm, declaring that Musio authored the reports on his own. The DA details how Grayson received two promotions and one raise related to caseload productivity in her unit. He also questions her about false reports with conflicting information in which children had been hurt. Finally, Grayson quietly states: "I didn't want any of this to happen" (37:23). She further describes the conflicts of her job:

"God himself could not do this job [...] You wanna judge me? You wouldn't last an hour in my world. And if I go, who is gonna be on the front lines? You? [...] You dump the most hapless cases in the world on us everyday. [...] We get the dregs of humanity! [...] Did you ever stop to think 'Gee, what happened before that?' [...] Now, you wanna put me in jail for this? Look in the mirror." (Mitchell, 2015, 37:35-39:22)

Grayson is committed to Bellevue and pleads guilty to manslaughter. Sheridan admits no wrongdoing and is sentenced to a year in prison. The DCS commissioner steps down and the city appoints an outside administrative board intent on revising DCS. Musio scoffs at all of this, deciding these superficial changes will revert once public scrutiny ends. He voices regret that when he is released, he will not be able to work with children.

Overall, this episode shows two versions of CPS workers: Musio seems regretful of his actions and cares for children, while Grayson is glib, at times an unsympathetic character, later revealing a stark outlook on the child welfare system aligning with Musio's cynicism and regret.

Audience feedback on the CPS plotline in SVU

When "Institutional Fail" aired in 2015, viewers left comments on X and Reddit during or after the episode's release date. Due to syndication, the episode is still discussed online

by viewers. This section will review audience feedback from sources like X, Reddit, and viewer comments left on a website for those employed in the field. The feedback is themed to discuss 1. the CPS portrayals; and 2. the perception of CPS work.

The CPS portrayals

Viewer posts analysed the realism of the episode in relation to CPS workers. Some lauded it as emblematic of what social workers experience: "This episode of SVU with Whoopi Goldberg was one of the best I've ever seen. So real and true about the child services being overworked and underpaid" (SVU Viewer 1, 2017). A similar sentiment came from a self-identified CPS worker: "I think every one of us social workers should be required to watch this episode. Probably my most memorable SVU episode" (SVU Viewer 2, 2023). One viewer described Musio maintaining a caring attitude with his workload:

"The direct care worker was shown to have done everything in his power to achieve impossible expectations for performance, given his caseload [...] I believe the show could be a wake-up call for people who believe that child care workers are at fault when a child in their care suffers." (SVU Viewer 3, 2015)

The posts above seem to convey empathy for the CPS workers, which was a common sentiment among viewers of this episode.

Perceptions of CPS work

Viewers discussed perceptions of CPS work in relation to the episode. On a social media site, SVU Viewer 4 (2022) wrote: "#SVU wrestles with kids who slip through the cracks of a poorly funded system – while ignoring the unnecessary largesse of the NYPD's budget, obvs –." The post identifies funding for child welfare and the NYPD, and how the show could have examined this difference.

One post featured comments about the possible negative portrayals and impacts on public perception. SVU Viewer 5 (2015) expressed how: "I feel like the last thing our profession needs right now is giving the general public the feeling that, indeed, social workers are all too burnt out to give a f***." Another poster agreed that the episode depicted the overworked nature of CPS workers, but that: "the agency/social workers were painted as bad people. So, yeah... Disappointing and only helping to fuel the bizarre 'social workers are corrupt monsters'" (SVU Viewer 6, 2015).

Making a distinction between qualifications and experience, this commenter noted: "they did throw in the line 'it's case work, not social work' and not all DCFs require that caseworkers are social workers, or even hold a BSW" (SVU Viewer 7, 2015). SVU Viewer 8 (2015) wrote:

“The episode implies that we social workers need the police to teach us compassion and ethics [...on SVU, the social workers...] are always either abusing their clients in some way, or they are just completely incompetent.”

Another poster added: “Seriously guys, it’s law and order, the writers are older than my clients and research for their stories are probably done entirely through Wikipedia articles” (*SVU Viewer* 9, 2015).

Overall, social media opinions about this *SVU* episode suggest audience members disagree over the characters and perceptions. Several posts mention Grayson’s character, with scant mention of Musio. The responses suggest several factors contribute to the character depictions and state of CPS work.

Observations from a former CPI

The *SVU* initially being assigned the child welfare case due to a patrol sergeant decision is not outside the realm of possibility. Musio being slow to provide the file on Ozuna is not uncommon (though it could have been intentional in this case). In Florida, DCFS files would not be released publicly or to another agency necessarily without a subpoena. The irate parent escorted from the office has occurred in real life settings. Grayson and Musio’s workload and sentiments regarding their job are accurate, if not over-dramatised.

The Sandman

In the Netflix series *The Sandman* (2022–present), Morpheus (Tom Sturridge) is a cosmic being who oversees humanity’s dreams. The series is based on Neil Gaiman’s graphic novel series from DC Comics. Rose Walker (Kyo Ra) is a supporting character and her interactions with a CPS worker are the focus of this case study. Rose’s parents have divorced, but she strives to keep her little brother, Jed (Eddie Karanja), happy. After their parents’ deaths, Rose wishes to obtain custody of Jed. CPS worker Eleanor Rubio (Shelley Williams) denies Rose custody, citing how Jed is in the care of friends of the father.

The CPS plot line cuts across two episodes of Season 1, “The Doll’s House” and “Playing House”. In the former, Eleanor is introduced as the Floridian *social worker* in charge of Jed Walker’s case. She informs Rose: “I cannot, by law, give out your brother’s information” (Baiz, 2022, 32:12). Eleanor characterises Jed’s caretakers as his parents, despite Rose identifying them as non-family members. When Rose points out she is Jed’s sister, Eleanor states “as such, you have no legal claim to him” (33:10). Rose takes the news poorly, asking Eleanor: “Could you just be a fucking human being for one second?” (33:17). Rose then calms somewhat and asks to get in touch with her brother. Eleanor denies this request because then Jed might ask to live with Rose, who is young and does not have a job or healthcare. According to Eleanor, the friends of Jed’s father applied to become Jed’s foster parents. Now, they receive 800 dollars per month and Jed is “doing just fine” (33:50).

In “Playing House”, Rose’s friend visits Eleanor’s office again, pleading with her to check on Jed. For one moment, the camera passes over a tumbler on Eleanor’s desk (presumably liquor). Eleanor calls Jed’s foster parents to alert them to her visit. The foster father, Barnaby (Sam Hazeldine), threatens violence against Jed if he misbehaves. The family and Eleanor are seen at the house, discussing Jed. When he is dismissed by Barnaby, Jed slips a note into Eleanor’s purse. Noticing this, Barnaby removes the note and locks Jed in the basement. Back in her office, Eleanor checks her purse, but the note is gone. She is then killed by one of Morpheus’ antagonists, the Corinthian (Boyd Holbrook).

Audience feedback on the CPS plotline in *The Sandman*

As *The Sandman* is relatively new in comparison to the other case studies, there are fewer social media posts reflecting on the CPS worker portrayal in Season 1. However, this section will review Reddit posts associated with Jed and the foster parents and realism.

Jed

Viewers speculate on why Jed was in foster care versus being placed with a living relative. One social media user (*Sandman* Viewer 1, 2022) writes:

“Shouldn’t he have been sent to live with his STILL LIVING mother after his dad died? Wtf kind of system puts a kid in foster care when the kid still has a perfectly decent, alive, and functional parent known to be living just a few states away?”

Viewers also note how Eleanor seemed concerned that Rose did not have a job, yet the foster parents received \$800 a month for taking care of Jed. Per *Sandman* Viewer 2:

“Rose should have said, ‘Wait. You could pay me \$800 a month to take care of Jed.’ Or: ‘Jed and I have a rich great-grandmother. She could adopt him and save the state \$800 a month.’”

Some viewers perceive the CPS situation as a plot hole. As one viewer posted:

“Due to the fact that the uncle sees the note Jed left for the social worker, it seems to be some sort of foster fraud scheme where she was getting kickbacks for helping the dead dad ‘sell’ his son into foster care” (*Sandman* Viewer 3, 2022).

Other online commenters fault the foster care system that loses or forgets children.

Foster parents and realism

Another social media post reflected on Jed's foster parents, stating:

“having been a foster parent five times, I always get super annoyed when fostering situations are presented in such an unrealistic manner [...] The idea that horrible people can just stroll up to foster agencies and have a kid placed with them just to start raking in the dough is frankly complete and utter horse shit” (Sandman Viewer 4, 2022).

Jed's foster parents, Clarise (Lisa O'Hare) and Barney are portrayed in a stereotypical manner: as an abusive father and a submissive mother. Based on Sandman Viewer 4's (2022) post: “Clarise may have been able to pass a background check, but there is no way in hell that an asshole like Barnaby would be able to.”

Other users disagreed about the unrealistic portrayal, citing personal experiences as foster care children. *Sandman* Viewer 5 (2022) shared: “[Abusive foster parents are] a trope. It's a fact. There are monsters out there. And sometimes they are human. The fact that you pretend they don't exist is sickening. It diminishes the reality of the situation.” Replies to the post contrasted with this view: “I don't know anything about foster parents or the foster system but the whole story felt so weird. There are so many problems with it that it felt cartoonish horror story with everyone being incompetent” (*Sandman* Viewer 6, 2022).

Some replies were neutral or gave a possible storytelling reason as to how Jed ended up with such foster parents: “I think they try to deal with this a little by indicating that Clarise and Barnaby had a connection to Jed's dad, maybe they had been named in his will or something” (*Sandman* Viewer 7, 2022). Some replies implied both foster parents were only taking care of Jed for the extra monthly income. *Sandman* Viewer 8 (2022) wrote: “some will be okay, maybe they're controlling or something, and some will be abusive/doing it for the money”.

Overall, the Redditors interpreted *The Sandman* CPS portrayal and subsequent interactions in different ways. Some posts suggest that foster parents have different motivations, while others debate the realism of the episode.

Observations from a former CPI

In terms of realism, Eleanor withholds caregiver information from Rose, but relative or non-relative information is not confidential. Most importantly, siblings (like Rose and Jed) are entitled to visitation (whether in or out of care). Rose has a claim and would have been evaluated for guardianship. Rose also would not have been “on her own” in taking care of Jed – she would have received assistance such as: relative caregiver funds, EBT, Medicaid, and more. Common practice dictates the CPS worker conduct a mix of unannounced and announced visits (yet, the non-relative caregivers seem surprised about the visit in the episode “Playing House”). She also should have interviewed the

family members separately, especially Jed. The abuse from the non-relative caregivers (incorrectly attributed as “foster parents”) and their need to “hang on to benefits” at any cost seems tenable in rare cases.

Discussion

As mentioned in the *Research methods* section, certain questions helped guide the analysis of television portrayals. These questions will be reviewed below, beginning with connections between the case studies and media posts.

What connections can be drawn between the case studies and social media posts?

Two of the case studies are dramas, while the other two fit the fantasy genre. It is perhaps not surprising that the portrayals of CPS workers in the latter were the most unrealistic. As Klein (2011) notes, television series “offer viewers material that they could take with them to other encounters with the issue. Drama is thus regarded as a legitimate additional resource from which to draw in the larger discussions of social issues” (p. 917). Through fantasy-tropes, Buffy of *BtVS* enacts revenge on Doris, perhaps metering out viewer-approved punishment. Aligning with other fantasy-horror tropes, Eleanor is killed off by a series antagonist (i.e. the Corinthian), providing viewer catharsis (or punishment) for her treatment of Jed. The trend of punishing a CPS worker is similar to what happens to Musio and Grayson in *SVU*. Even though there are two fantasy shows and two drama shows, the social media responses do not seem to differentiate between the portrayals. For instance, the social media debates about the CPS responses for all four series are similar in different ways. Additionally, because the fantasy shows depict CPS workers more negatively, possibly due to the nature of the fantasy shows being less based on realism anyway, it seems to reinforce any potential negative misconceptions the social media commenters may have held prior to watching the episode.

Of the case studies reviewed, the CPS workers were more empathetic after disregarding regulations or going *above and beyond* in their duties (as Andrea and Musio did). In *SVU*, CPS workers were portrayed as overworked, leading to child neglect and even death. This may stem from a belief that CPS workers do the bare minimum and are bogged down in regulation. As Zugazaga et al. (2006) suggest: “Images of the media [portrayal] of social workers serve to formulate the perception of those who have no direct contact with the profession” (p. 633). This also aligns with the perception of CPS being underfunded, leading to another perception of removing children rather than offering services. The *SVU* dramatisation had real world implications, as seen in two *Tampa Bay Times* stories when CPIs confessed to falsifying reports (Solomon, 2019; Verschoor, 2019).

Concerning the social media posts in relation to each case study, some of the viewers seem to dislike CPS workers, while others note realistic details of the job. These connections could mean that when CPS workers are portrayed on screen, their roles are simplified and polarised (they are portrayed as either good or bad) due to a lack of public knowledge about the function of a CPS worker. Freeman and Valentine (2004) take this thought further by stating:

“The ways in which social work is portrayed in popular culture contribute to the shaping of the public’s image of social workers, of social problems with which social workers are involved, and of clients as the consumers of social work services” (p. 151).

Additionally, series creators need to create dramatic tension and plot points. With their limited CPS knowledge, they could write these scenes with drama in mind. In addition, while main characters in TV shows are often nuanced, deep and evolving, these brief supporting roles may be written in a superficial way due to time constraints and to simplify details for viewers.

What does it mean that several popular TV portrayals are by women?

Three of the portrayals from the case studies are by women. Unlike the other three case studies, the *SVU* episode features a man (Musio) as a CPS worker, even though his supervisor is a woman (Grayson). This is consistent with the Bureau of Labor Statistics data from 2023 (BLS, 2024), which indicates that 88% of social workers in the child, family, and school subsectors are female.

As Freeman and Valentine (2004) stated:

“If people believe what they see in the movies, social workers are mostly women, mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual; they mostly work in child welfare, are likely to be incompetent, have a tendency to engage in sexual relationships with clients, mostly work with people living in poverty, and mostly function to maintain the societal status quo” (p. 159).

This could denote how the profession is to a great extent dominated by women, or it could be due to this type of work being seen as caregiving.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this study reviewed aspects of media for CPS workers, using TV portrayals as case studies. Although the case studies depicted various portrayals of the CPS workers, the realism of their roles did not always align with common practice. As noted, the two fantasy genre portrayals were the most unrealistic of the four case studies.

Although the two drama genre portrayals were more realistic, there were inconsistencies. Such anomalies may contribute to misinformed public perceptions, along with the fact that most people have not had and will never have any direct interaction with a CPS worker. More research is needed about television portrayals of CPS workers, public perceptions, and TV script writers' decisions. This might include a focus group with audiences to determine more about their perceived bias before and after viewing an episode with CPS portrayals, and/or a focus group with television creators. Such studies could clarify why the characters are written in certain lights or why viewers post about certain topics.

Other suggestions for achieving a better representation of CPS workers in US television shows include adding a disclaimer of sorts. Such a disclaimer (similar to banners like *Based on a true story*) for CPS portrayals could further acknowledge how the characters do not (always) reflect real-world practice. This would also inform viewers that they are viewing a dramatisation. If television writers and showrunners consulted with professionals in the field, they would also gain insights into CPS characters and motivations. Another option would be to have scripts vetted by former or current CPS workers. It is the belief of these researchers that television creators have a responsibility (when adding CPS workers to storylines) to dramatise such roles with integrity, especially as these portrayals can become a spotlight for CPS practice.

Additionally, social service departments should actively engage with social media and their local community in positive ways to deter fear and allay misconceptions. Though it is not possible to release specifics about CPS cases due to privacy and confidentiality concerns for minors, there are ways in which individual CPS workers can impact social media narratives, such as the efforts on TikTok noted in the literature review. Leveraging technology and social aspects in positive ways may constitute the technoprosociality that is needed in the CPS profession.

It is of note that the case studies underwhelmingly represented or even excluded the children's perspective in relation to home life and a CPS presence. With the exception of *Shameless*, the case studies (at times) used the children as plot devices. There were not many scenes including dialogue (or extended dialogue) between the children and CPS workers. If there were scenes, the contact between children and CPS workers was fleeting. The role of children in CPS plotlines could be characterised as absent in terms of power dynamics, dialogue, and consequential actions. Although children may not fit the narrative as a protagonist in some of the case studies, whether the CPS are involved or not, they are the protagonists of their own stories. Focus groups involving children and their perspectives on CPS and CPS narratives in television could also be an area of future study. Throughout much of this research, what became clear was the scarcity of public knowledge of CPS workers and an abundance of stereotypes. Social TV and Customer Engagement Behaviors have perhaps influenced television creatives, who may believe they understand the role of CPS workers and so write the characters with little to no research or consultation. With more research from TV creatives, future portrayals of CPS workers could add more substance to storylines, generating more understanding from audiences regarding CPS work.

Appendix

Table 1:
TV shows, CPS or Social Worker Characters, and Perception of Portrayal

TV Show Name (Year)	Name of CPS or Social Worker	Portrayal
E.R. (1994–2009)	Social Worker Adele Newman (Erica Gimpel) Seasons 3, 4, 6–9	Mostly positive
E.R. (1994–2009)	Social Worker Ken Sung (Daniel Dae Kim) Season 10	Neutral (not negative/positive)
E.R. (1994–2009)	Social Worker Wendall Meade (Mädchen Amick) Season 11	Neutral (not negative/positive)
E.R. (1994–2009)	Social Worker Liz Dade (Tara Karsian) Season 12, 13, 15	Neutral (not negative/positive)
Judging Amy (1995–2005)	Social Worker Maxine Gray (Tyne Daly)	Mostly positive
Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1996–2002)	Social Worker Doris Kroeger (Susan Ruttan)	Mostly negative
Norm (1999–2001)	Social worker Norm Henderson (Norm Macdonald)	Neutral (not negative/positive)
SVU (1999–present)	DCS Caseworker Keith Musio (John Magaro)	Mostly positive
SVU (1999–present)	DCS Supervisor Janette Grayson (Whoopi Goldberg)	Mostly negative
Mercy (2009–2010)	Social Worker Lorraine (Monica DeBonis)	Mostly negative
Ugly Americans (2010–2012)	Social Worker Mark Lilly (Matt Oberg)	Mostly positive
Shameless (2011–2021)	DCFS caseworker Brittany Sturgess (Keiko Agena)	Mostly positive
The Bridge (2013–2014)	Social Worker Linder (Thomas M. Wright)	Mostly negative
Jessica Jones (2015–019)	Social Worker Malcolm Ducasse (Eka Darville)	Mostly positive
This Is Us (2016–2022)	Social Worker Linda (Debra Jo Rupp)	Mostly positive
Homecoming (2018–2020)	Caseworker Heidi Bergman (Julia Roberts)	Mostly negative
The Sandman (2022–)	Social Worker Eleanor Rubio (Shelley Williams)	Mostly negative

Source: Compiled by the authors.

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