

ORIGINAL ARTICLE



What do you Think about Parenting? Challenges to Cohesiveness in Child Protection Teams

Dora Pereira 

Research Centre for Regional and Local Studies (CIERL-UMa), University of Madeira, Funchal, Portugal

Correspondence

Dora Pereira, Faculty of Arts and Humanities – Department of Psychology, University of Madeira, Campus da Penteada, 9020-105 Funchal, Portugal.
Email: dora.pereira@staff.uma.pt

Abstract

Child protection work requires professionals to manage the different perspectives regarding intervention aims and strategies associated with different personal, academic and organisational backgrounds. Parenting assessment is a determinant task for intervention and for children's future where universal or automatic criteria remain unavailable. This study aimed to explore and characterise the existing agreement (and disagreement) between child protection workers on statements related to judgements on parenting. A total of 325 Portuguese social workers participated in the study, mostly with a background in social work and psychology and more than six years of experience in child protection. Professionals were required to distribute 50 sentences in a scoring sheet (Q-sort methodology) with 11 points. The results were interpreted through the matrix of operationalisation of minimally adequate parenting. Three main answer strands revealed different *focuses* in sorts' configurations: the child, the procedures and the child's ecology. The clear difference between the factors could contribute to maintaining the child protection system as an adversarial one, and not as an effectively cooperative system. To promote team cohesiveness and intervention success, and to reinforce professionals' wellbeing and resilience, metacommunication on parenting assessment criteria is proposed as a determinant strategy.

KEYWORDS

assessment, child protection, minimally adequate parenting, Q-sort methodology

Key practitioner messages

- Different personal, academic and professional backgrounds are related to different criteria in parenting assessment.
- Three main answer strands were identified: the child, the procedures and the child's ecology. The statistical difference between the answer strands may reflect the adversarial climate between professionals and be a factor contributing to decision postponing.
- Metacommunication spaces should be assured in order to promote cohesiveness and effective cooperation between professionals.

INTRODUCTION

Child protection work is necessarily a team effort. The intervention process requires the participation of several services, such as health, police, social protection, education and the courts, in each of which specific teams operate. Work between teams toward developing cooperative effort (Neil et al., 2019; Rácz, 2019; Reder & Duncan, 2003) is a complex system, where third order learning (Bateson, 1979) focusing 'the system of systems' should be achieved, as it allows

the metaview of mental health, relational wellbeing and the therapeutic work as nested and interrelated systems (McDowell et al., 2023). From Bateson's perspective, the third order thinking level, brings the acknowledgement of the influence of the collective meaning-making, the power dynamics and the culture of professionals' work with families (McDowell et al., 2019, 2023). Borghet (2014) identified three complexity levels interacting in the organisational context: (1) the individual, (2) the legal and academic references framing the professional's work, and (3) the specific cultural traditions of each organisation. The present study focused on the interactions between the first and second complexity levels, acknowledging that they influence and are influenced by that process of collective meaning-making within the interconnecting systems present in child protection system.

Communication processes (oral, written, direct and indirect) are at the core of child protection work, as at each moment professionals should be able to share information between them, and also with children and families. Each professional with his/her specific scientific background has (many times) different terms to refer to a common issue. Thus, communicative skills (Forrester et al., 2012) should be flexible enough to adapt to people in different developmental levels and with different roles in the process. Parenting assessment is, with risk assessment, a step that influences the work of all professionals involved in a case (Pearce & Pezzot-Pearce, 2007; Pereira & Alarcão, 2015; Pezzot-Pearce & Pearce, 2004). In Portugal parenting assessment results from the work of different child protection workers (CPW), under the coordination of a case manager. The assessment process and conclusions are presented to decision-makers, the local board or the court, to inform the best decision to be made. In addition to those who participate directly in the assessment, the consequences of its outcome will influence the procedures that will be proposed and developed in the short term. Thus, the quality of parenting assessment is (among other variables) influenced by professionals' communication through the process, their views about the case and their agreement or disagreement with the outcome. Reder and Duncan (2003) pointed out that the major problems in child protection work are related to how a professional thinks about a case, how available information is processed and how he/she interacts with the other people involved. In addition, each worker builds his/her professional identity through daily encounters between his/her theories, beliefs and experiences with events (Abdullahi, 2021; Neimeyer, 2009), in the context of specific relations with children, families, other professionals and organisations. Jones et al. (2019) note that CPW must acknowledge the judgements, values and beliefs they bring to work with families. From this perspective, changing a position, especially one with strong emotional impact (Munro, 1999; Reder & Duncan, 2003), may be felt as a threat to professional identity and a major source of stress impacting directly the work's quality.

Communication between teams in child protection is, on many occasions, focused on the assessment theme and its potential implications; however, the criteria used in assessment are not so clear and focused. This important mindset is often an issue taken for granted as professionals follow the same legal and professional norms. From a systemic point of view (Von Bertalanffy, 1968), assessment criteria belong to a metacommunicative domain (Bateson, 1979), reaching beyond the content to focus on the process that frames and gives meaning to interprofessional relations (and the relations between professionals and all the other parts of the system) (Branco et al., 2004). Parenting assessment sets a frame in which many variables must be considered and evaluated with no consensual or clear criteria, and uncertainty of implications for child development is a sure fact. Despite this it must be executed and translated into decisions and actions in a very short time frame. Such characteristics demonstrate the quality of relations between professionals, as trust and support should be the safe havens in the middle of a demanding and stressful task (Pereira & Alarcão, 2015). Meanwhile, differences could lead to less cohesiveness, thereby becoming an obstacle to the organisation and the planned intervention.

PARENTING ASSESSMENT: LOOKING FOR WHAT AND WITH WHAT CRITERIA?

Children's wellbeing and their needs fulfilment are the main reasons child protective services exist. In understanding parenting as a process of caring and promoting the child's best development (Coordination des ONG pour les droits de l'enfant, 2011; Pereira, 2019), the assessment locates the evaluated parents or carers in a *continuum* between the optimal and the most detrimental parenting, distinguishing as clearly as possible the point that justifies service intervention, where parenting cannot be qualified as minimally adequate. In 2014, a qualitative study developed in Portugal (Pereira & Alarcão, 2014) asked three professional groups, namely, academics, judges and social workers, about the criteria that could be used to define 'minimally adequate parenting'. The outcome of this study was the matrix of operationalisation on the concept of 'minimally adequate parenting' (Figure 1) that proposes a tridimensional perspective: through it, the criteria used to assess parenting may be characterised in terms of their ecological origin (Bronfenbrenner & Evans, 2000), their mode and their time markers.

More specifically, with the first dimension should be considered criteria from: (1) the ontosystem (related to the wellbeing of the child, considering his/her specific needs) and microsystem (related to the quality of interactions between the child and his/her carers) that are directly associated to the references used to consider the existence of risk for the

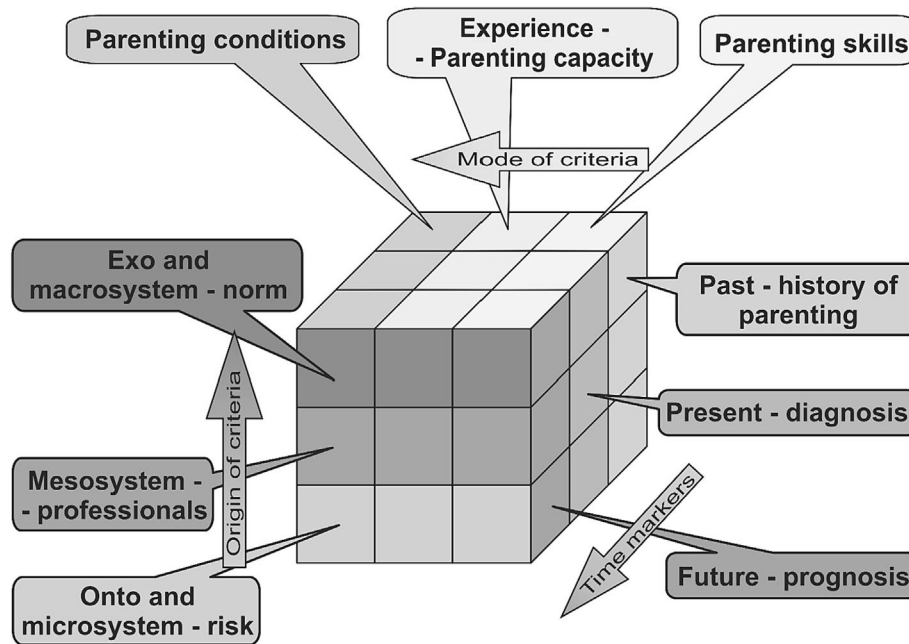


FIGURE 1 Matrix of operationalisation of the concept of minimally adequate parenting. From [Pereira & Alarcão, 2014]. © [2012] by ISPA-CRL. Adapted with permission.

child; (2) the exosystem and macrosystem, related to the legal and cultural norms considered by each society; (3) and the mesosystem, related to professional practices and procedures that strive to integrate the two kinds of criteria mentioned above and define how CPW should do their job and cooperate with one another. Besides their ecological origin, criteria may assume different modes (second dimension) in parenting functioning, as they may be related to (1) parenting conditions, including the specific issues related to each specific parenting condition (e.g. parenting in adoptive, homoparental or heteroparental biological families); (2) parenting practices, including the criteria related to the performance of parenting skills (e.g. how limits should be managed, how a child should be stimulated or how their basic needs are satisfied); and (3) parenting capacity, including the criteria related to how parenting is experienced and the potential of each carer to update their skills with respect to the child's development (Steinhauer et al., 1993) (e.g. how parents consider the parenting task in their lives, what are their beliefs about parenting). The third dimension relates to the chronological perspective, namely, to the meaning given to (1) the past, or the history of parenting; (2) the present, or the actual diagnosis; and (3) the future, or the prognosis based on actual information. The interactions of the dimensions mirror the complexity of the assessment process and elucidate how deep or superficial it can be, as for example, when the information collected is related to only one ecological level or a single moment in time.

As part of the mesosystem, CPW should integrate criteria related to the developmental risk and legal and cultural norms, and clarify their positions with peers, courts and families. Such a complex task may naturally cause doubts and stress to arise in CPW, mostly if they do not have the opportunity to make their view clear enough to other parts of the system and feel stuck or attacked in having to choose between two options, as (e.g.) when they must decide if they would recommend out of home care for a child (Meynckens-Fourez, 2011). The assessment criteria become especially relevant because the congruence between the perspectives of parents and professionals regarding the situation is a determinant of intervention success (Corby et al., 2002; de Boer & Coady, 2007; Holt & Kelly, 2018; Sanders et al., 2017).

As universal criteria do not exist (Budd & Springman, 2011), individual experiences and values become the main references for each professional (Munro & Hardie, 2019), and are also part of their personal and professional identity. Each individual will look for validation of his/her own framing (Botella & Feixas, 1998; Kelly, 1955/1991) and an invalidating experience (Neimeyer, 2009) may be considered by the professional as a threat to his/her own beliefs and personal values, associated with negative feelings, and having a negative impact on the quality of his/her work (Botella & Feixas, 1998). Differences may lead to power conflicts, where an adversarial dynamic takes place, in which one loses and the other wins. The power associated with a professional role (McDowell et al., 2019) may be (negatively) used to impose 'over' colleagues or families (Dumbrill, 2006, p. 30) a vision that is considered the most correct because it is consistent with the personal experience (Forrester et al., 2012); if the perspective of a professional becomes inflexible, unique and based on few shared constructs, then the probability of invalidation increases, as well as the establishment

of 'illegitimate alliances' (Meynckens-Fourez, 2011, p. 49) and 'denied coalitions' (Meynckens-Fourez, 2011, p. 50) to avoid that invalidation.

In consideration of the importance of interprofessional relations (within and between teams) to professionals' well-being and the quality of intervention (Robin, 2011), the present study aimed to determine the agreement (and disagreement) between CPW regarding parenting assessment criteria.

METHODS

The main objective of this quantitative cross-sectional study was to explore and characterise the existing agreement between a group of Portuguese CPW regarding the statements proposed by Brigid Daniel (2000, p. 94). These statements express criteria that professionals use when assessing parenting, similar to those informally applied in the Portuguese context. For this reason, it was considered that their use could also open a new route for further comparative studies between different child protective systems. The specific concern of this research (i.e. determining the agreement between professionals) could also give important clues to promoting communication and cohesiveness among professionals and the efficacy of their interventions. As Watts and Stenner (2005) proposed, Q-methodology is adequate to study socially complex and subjective issues and concepts with respect to the participants' vision, and may bring a sense of coherence to the research. As such, it was adopted in the present study as the most adequate research design option for maximising ecological validity (Brunswick, 1956).

Participants

A total of 325 Portuguese CPW participated in the study (297 women and 28 men). The professionals were invited to participate at the beginning of workshops about parenting assessment, directed only to CPW, that took place over a period of three years. Each workshop had a maximum of 25 participants. The group that agreed to participate in the study is characterised by sex, number of years of working in child protection system and area of academic study (Table 1).

The group mostly included women, with an academic background in social work (40.3 per cent) and psychology (23.38 per cent), and with more than six years of experience.

Procedures

The first step was to obtain permission from the author Brigid Daniel for the use of the statements; they were translated into Portuguese and pilot tested to a limited number of CPW to assess their suitability for the Portuguese context. The statements to be sorted were distributed at the beginning of a workshop on parenting assessment. The participants were asked to distribute the 50 statements in a map with an 11-point *continuum* from *totally disagree* (−5) to *totally agree* (5). Figure 2 shows the distribution map. The participants were given 40 min to complete the task. The time condition was designed as a stressor, similar to the time constraints faced in actual practice. It was explained to the professionals that the task was voluntary, individual, anonymous, intended to be included in a research on parenting assessment, and would not be shared in any future moment of the training, to fulfil ethical standards and minimise the possible impact of social desirability. Participants gave their informed consent.

Data analysis using Q-methodology

Q-methodology was used and the sortings were analysed using the program Ken-Q v1.0.5 (Banasick, 2018). After the correlational analysis between all of the sorted statements the number of factors to extract were used two criteria suggested by Watts and Stenner (2005), the higher values of variance explained and the number indicated by the point where the line changes slope in the screeplot. As Van Exel and de Graaf (2005, p. 12) affirmed, each factor represents a group of individual points of view that are highly correlated with one another and less correlated with other 'gestalt' items. Each factor is presented using the composite Q sort, built with the Ken-Q program. The composite Q sort of a factor represents how a hypothetical respondent with a 100 per cent loading on that factor would have ordered all of the statements in the Q-set (Van Exel & de Graaf, 2005). Their meaning is analysed through the matrix of operationalisation of the minimally adequate parenting concept. Toward this end, the statements were previously categorised in the three main dimensions of the matrix (and their respective components), according to the definitions presented in Figure 3.

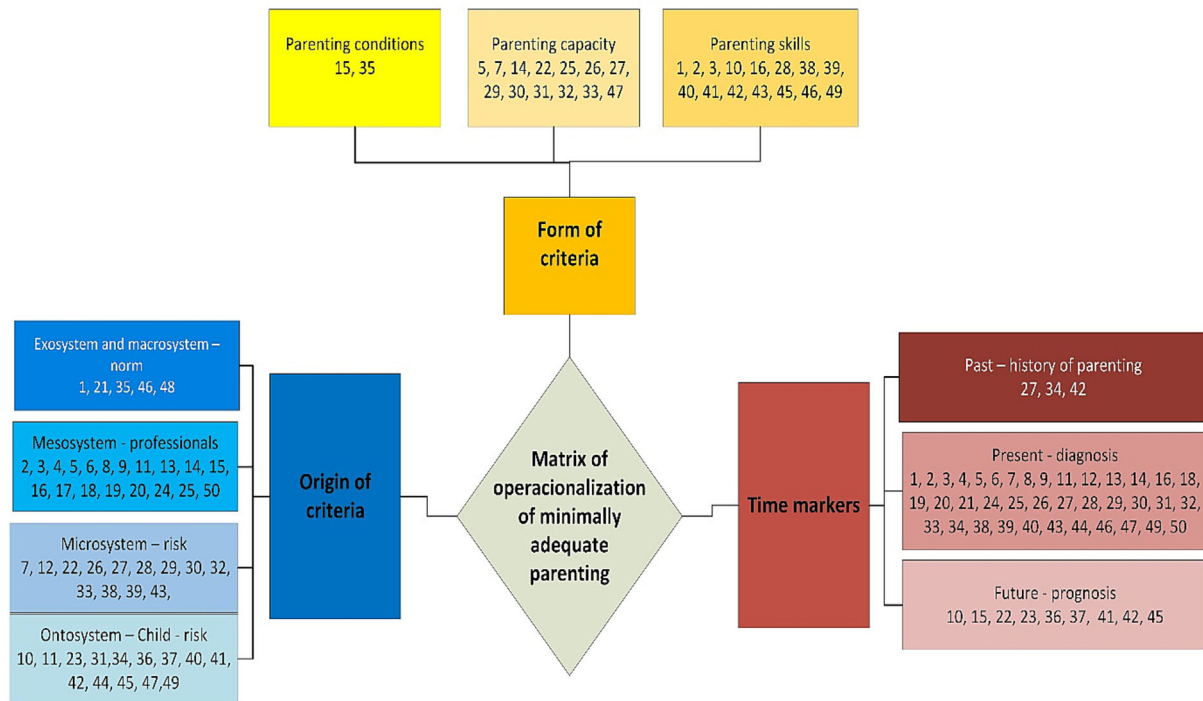


FIGURE 3 Statements' categorisation by matrix' dimensions.

TABLE 2 Factor' eigenvalues and % explanation of variance (unrotated matrix).

Factor	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Eigenvalues	99.036	16.703	10.841	9.798	8.869	8.395	7.921	7.505
% Explained variance	31	5	3	3	3	3	2	2

TABLE 3 Factors' characteristics and z-scores (retained for rotation).

Factor	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
No. of defining variables	158	56	55
Avg. rel. coef.	0.8	0.8	0.8
Composite reliability	0.998	0.996	0.995
S.E. of factor Z-scores	0.045	0.063	0.071

values between (-1) and (1) attributed in the composite Qsort include the statements that were more neutral to the professionals represented by that factor.

RESULTS

Correlational analysis between all the sorted statements distinguished eight factors/groups of answers that explained 52 per cent of the variance (unrotated matrix) (Table 2) and three factors were retained for rotation (Table 3 and Figure 4). Table 4 shows the z-scores of each statement in each one of the three factors. Table 5 shows the rank of each statement in each factor. In the following sections the three factors (F1, F2 and F3) will be analysed as also the general consensus or disagreement observed globally in the group of participants with the statements proposed.

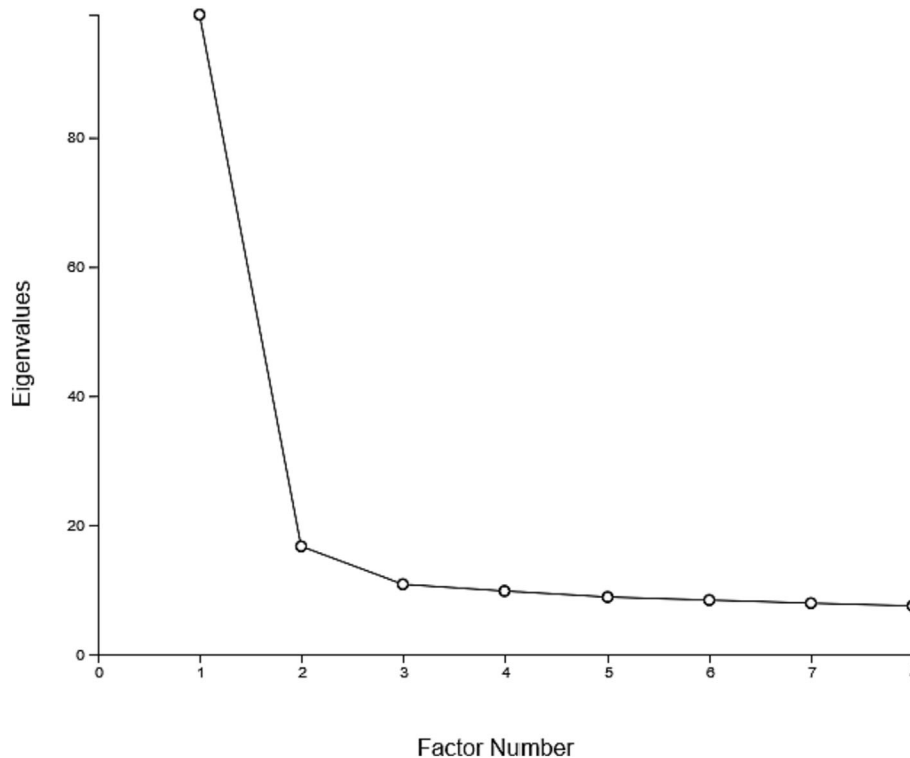


FIGURE 4 Screeplot: factors before rotation.

Factor 1: focus on the child

The distinguishing statements for Factor 1 are presented in Figure 5. In this ‘gestalt,’ the participants valued more the criteria originated in the ontosystem (associated with the child) and the developmental impact of the situations of danger/risk; such weighting was especially clear in the set of criteria with which they most agreed. Statement 40 (‘A damaging environment is one which undermines children’s self confidence and self-esteem.’) is one that is highly valued in F1 (3) and that is neutral to F2 and F3. The statements on the extremes followed the same pattern: they totally disagreed with ‘Sometimes it is better for the child to be left in a situation where they are at risk of sexual abuse rather than be separated from someone they have a strong bond with’ (S45) and totally agreed with ‘Children need a consistently available parental figure’ (S29). In terms of mode, this factor showed more agreement with criteria related to parental capacity (i.e. the structural aspects of parental behaviour, which are more stable over time). However, the criteria associated with parental practices were present in a larger number in this configuration of results, mostly in the disagreement area, which also included criteria related to professional procedures: ‘All too often, parents with problems are treated harshly by social work departments and do not get the support they need to keep their children out of the care system’ (S6) and ‘There may be a dulled response to certain well-known families who are not providing good enough care’ (S3).

Factor 2: focus on the procedures

The distinguishing statements for Factor 2 (Figure 6) were mostly related to criteria concerning professional procedures, with origin in the mesosystem. The statement that garnered total agreement was ‘No one factor determines what is good enough parenting; as a result, the same criteria are used but may result in different assessments dependent on the combination of factors’ (S17), which was directly related to parenting assessment. Meanwhile, ‘Intrusion into family privacy should occur only when there is a report of physical or sexual abuse of children or the imminent risk of serious bodily injury’ (S2), also associated with professional procedures, received total disagreement. Another important feature of this factor was that S1 ‘The vast majority of children in child protection systems have been neither harmed, injured, nor neglected but come from homes where their carer or carers are judged as unconventional in their child-rearing practices’ was valued with agreement (2), in contrast with F1 and F3, where it was valued with strong

TABLE 4 Statements' z-scores and significance (*) in factors.

Statements	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
1 The vast majority of children in child protection systems have been neither harmed, injured nor neglected, but come from homes where their carer or carers are judged as unconventional in their child rearing practices.	-1.41*	1.267*	-1.942*
2 Intrusion into family privacy should occur only when there is a report of physical or sexual abuse of children or the imminent risk of serious bodily injury.	-1.28*	-2.587*	0.302*
3 There may be a dulled response to certain well known families who are not providing good enough care.	-1.48	-0.85*	-1.426
4 Social workers accept lower standards of parenting than others in the community would.	-1.07*	-0.512*	-0.784*
5 On the whole the system operates according to a 'rule of optimism' whereby, wherever possible, the most favourable interpretations of family, particularly parental, circumstances is made.	-0.8*	-0.508*	-0.13*
6 All too often parents with problems are treated harshly by social work departments and do not get the support they need to keep their children out of the care system.	-1.42*	-0.872*	-1.196*
7 The majority of routine referrals for child protection seem to reflect social and family problems rather than cases of serious injury to the child.	-0.26*	1.36*	0.872*
8 There should be agreement by all child protection workers, police and other agencies about what is good enough parenting and what is abuse and child protection investigations should only be triggered when concerns are outside agreed dimensions.	0.02*	1.053*	1.517*
9 The criteria for triggering child protection procedures can vary depending on which senior manager is involved.	-1.07	-0.9	-1.193
10 Any problem which may have an adverse impact on a child and can be attributed to some act of commission or omission by an adult should be labelled as child abuse or neglect.	0.16*	-0.513*	1.149*
11 Any concerns by professional or lay people around the safety and well-being of a child must be looked at.	0.62*	1.312*	1.969*
12 Many child sexual abuse situations are missed because perpetrators are devious individuals.	0.25*	1.546*	1.089*
13 Middle class men are usually able to convince social workers of their innocence in child sexual abuse cases.	-1.09	-1.15	-0.45*
14 My child care assessments are never influenced by resource factors.	-0.53	-0.56	-0.15*
15 If it is not possible to provide a better alternative, the local authority must be wary of separating a child from their family of origin. This has influenced my decisions in respect of a number of cases.	-0.36*	0.377*	1.282*
16 I try to work from the premise that all children deserve the same level of care and attention but that some children, because of the environment they live in, require more.	0.07*	1.478	1.665
17 No one factor determines what is good enough parenting, as a result the same criteria are used but may result in different assessments dependent on the combination of factors.	0.15*	1.872*	1.342*
18 I want to believe I have a baseline of what is good enough for children, that I will not step over.	0.14	0.1	1.13*
19 My baseline of what is good-enough for children changes according to my perceptions of a particular family's culture.	-0.7	-0.15*	-0.803
20 In the work that we do it is difficult to make absolute judgements about good enough parenting.	-0.19*	0.822*	0.266*
21 In practice 'good enough parenting' can often represent a 'lesser' version of parenting.	-0.64	-0.45	-0.52
22 Often what is 'good enough' is out of the control of parents as poverty can have a devastating effect on the emotional, psychological, physical and mental health of the parents as primary carers.	-0.53*	0.189*	-0.182*
23 Expected physical milestones children should reach is more easily defined than emotional needs.	0.11	0.74*	0.323
24 I use the same criteria for assessing the parental behaviour of my clients as I would for myself or my friends.	-0.45	-0.37	-0.17
25 My clients have less financial resources to provide toys, books, and stimulation than I and my friends (who are in jobs) have. Therefore, I have to use a lesser standard for clients.	-1.12*	-0.911	-0.769
26 Parents need to have a sense of their own worth before they can meet their children's needs.	0.24	0.09*	0.86*
27 It is essential for effective parenting that a parent's own development has reached an appropriate adult level.	0.64	0.57	1.22*
28 The essential aspect of parenting is providing for a child's physical needs and safety.	0.17	-1051*	0.002
29 Children need a consistently available parental figure.	1.92*	1411	1607
30 Parents need the ability to put the child's needs first.	1.43	1.11*	1.436

TABLE 4 (Continued)

Statements	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
31 Positive attachment to a carer seems to me to be the single most significant determining factor in good enough parenting.	1.02*	0.122*	0.727*
32 It is damaging for children to have parents with drug related problems where intake of drugs is not regulated by prescription.	0.92*	0.021	0.266*
33 It is always damaging for children when the primary carer abuses alcohol.	0.89*	0.203	0.209
34 I have seen cases where, by the theoretical evidence, the child should not thrive but yet he or she has for whatever reason(s).	0.13	-0.024	-0.09
35 It is not possible to make absolute judgements about what children need to thrive emotionally because of political, social and cultural changes.	-0.49	-0.55	-0.95*
36 Childhood sexual abuse is a major risk factor for a variety of problems, both in the short term and in terms of later adult functioning.	1.92*	1.238*	0.185*
37 Emotional abuse can have much more serious consequences for a child than physical chastisement.	1.44*	0.567	0.383
38 The most damaging environment for children is one of low warmth and high criticism.	0.89*	-0.453	-0.206
39 It is damaging for children to live in an atmosphere of violence.	1.88*	1.407*	0.071*
40 A damaging environment is one which undermines children's self confidence and self-esteem.	0.93*	-0.184	-0.216
41 Neglect exposes young children to greater risks of injury and death than other forms of abuse.	0.1*	-0.981	-0.737
42 In a warm supportive environment, children who have been hit once or twice seldom suffer long-term negative effects.	-0.42*	-1.012	-1.037
43 Physical abuse is often discipline gone too far.	-0.78*	-1.017	-1.161
44 Children regularly seeing their mother beaten can suffer as much as if they themselves had been frequently and severely hit.	1.33*	0.706*	-0.359*
45 Sometimes it is better for the child to be left in a situation where they are at risk of sexual abuse, rather than to be separated from someone they have a strong bond with.	-2.6	-2.51	-2.34
46 The deliberate commission of abuse against a child is much more serious than the omission of care.	0.2*	-0.542*	-1.006*
47 Children can be perfectly happy, even if living in situations of extreme dirt and untidiness.	-0.39	-0.3	-0.69*
48 Sexual acts between an adult and a young person under 16 should always be viewed as involving an element of abuse.	1.32*	0.137	0.276
49 A child who is physically neglected is very likely to be experiencing emotional neglect as well.	1.11*	0.352*	-0.292*
50 I give more weight to my own professional judgement than to guidelines and procedures.	-0.88*	-1.101	-1.339

Statements from 'Judgements about Parenting: What do Social Workers Think They are Doing?' by B. Daniel, *Child Abuse Review*, 9 (2000), 91-107.(c) [2019] by John Wiley & Sons. Reprinted with permission.

* $P < .05$ (distinguishing statements in factor).

disagreement (-3 and -4, respectively). The participants also valued other criteria related to mode, showing more agreement with those associated to parenting capacity (as in Factor 1) and more disagreement with those related to parenting practices.

Factor 3: focus on the child's ecology

In this factor, the distinguishing statements included those related to all dimensions of the three axes of the matrix of operationalisation of the concept of minimally adequate parenting. Factor 3 included statements related to the implications of situations in children and professionals' procedures in the agreement and disagreement area (Figure 7), integrating aspects referred in the two previous factors. The statements 'Sometimes it is better for the child to be left in a situation where they are at risk of sexual abuse rather than be separated from someone they have a strong bond with' (S45) and 'Any concerns by professional or lay people on the safety and wellbeing of a child must be looked at' (S11) were valued as totally disagree and totally agree, respectively, indicating an integrative stance. This factor was also distinguished, through disagreement, by statements related to the past as a time marker (S42: 'In a warm supportive environment, children who have been hit once or twice seldom suffer long-term negative effects'), and to the exosystem and macrosystem as the origin of criteria (S35: 'It is not possible to make absolute judgments about what children need to thrive emotionally because of political, social, and cultural change'). Meanwhile, statements related to parenting

TABLE 5 Statements' rank and score values in factors.

Statement	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
	Rank	SV	Rank	SV	Rank	SV
1	47	-3	8	2	49	-4
2	46	-3	50	2	17	-4
3	49	-3	39	2	48	-4
4	43	-3	34	2	39	-4
5	40	-3	33	2	26	-4
6	48	-3	40	2	46	-4
7	29	-3	6	2	12	-4
8	27	-3	11	2	4	-4
9	42	-3	41	2	45	-4
10	20	-3	35	2	9	-4
11	15	-3	7	2	1	-4
12	16	-3	2	2	11	-4
13	44	-3	48	2	34	-4
14	35	-3	38	2	27	-4
15	30	-3	17	2	7	-4
16	26	-3	3	2	2	-4
17	21	-3	1	2	6	-4
18	22	-3	23	2	10	-4
19	38	-3	27	2	40	-4
20	28	-3	12	2	19	-4
21	37	-3	31	2	35	-4
22	36	-3	20	2	29	-4
23	24	-3	13	2	16	-4
24	33	-3	30	2	28	-4
25	45	-3	42	2	38	-4
26	17	-3	24	2	13	-4
27	14	-3	15	2	8	-4
28	19	-3	46	2	24	-4
29	1	-3	4	2	3	-4
30	5	-3	10	2	5	-4
31	9	-3	22	2	14	-4
32	11	-3	25	2	20	-4
33	13	-3	19	2	21	-4
34	23	-3	26	2	25	-4
35	34	-3	37	2	41	-4
36	2	-3	9	2	22	-4
37	4	-3	16	2	15	-4
38	12	-3	32	2	30	-4
39	3	-3	5	2	23	-4
40	10	-3	28	2	31	-4
41	25	-3	43	2	37	-4
42	32	-3	44	2	43	-4
43	39	-3	45	2	44	-4
44	6	-3	14	2	33	-4
45	50	-3	49	2	50	-4
46	18	-3	36	2	42	-4
47	31	-3	29	2	36	-4

TABLE 5 (Continued)

Statement	Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
	Rank	SV	Rank	SV	Rank	SV
48	7	-3	21	2	18	-4
49	8	-3	18	2	32	-4
50	41	-3	47	2	47	-4

Legend: SV, score value.

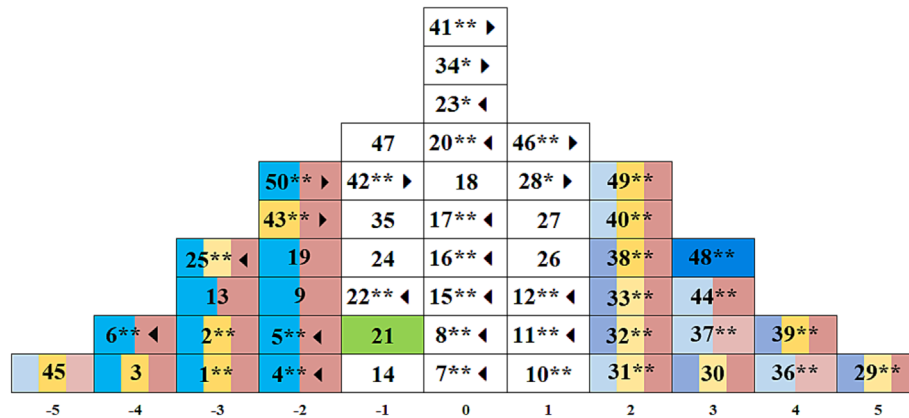


FIGURE 5 Composite Q-sort for Factor 1. Legend: *Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$; **Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$; ▶ z-score for the statement higher than in F2 and F3; ◀ z-score for the statement lower than in F2 and F3; ■ consensus statement.

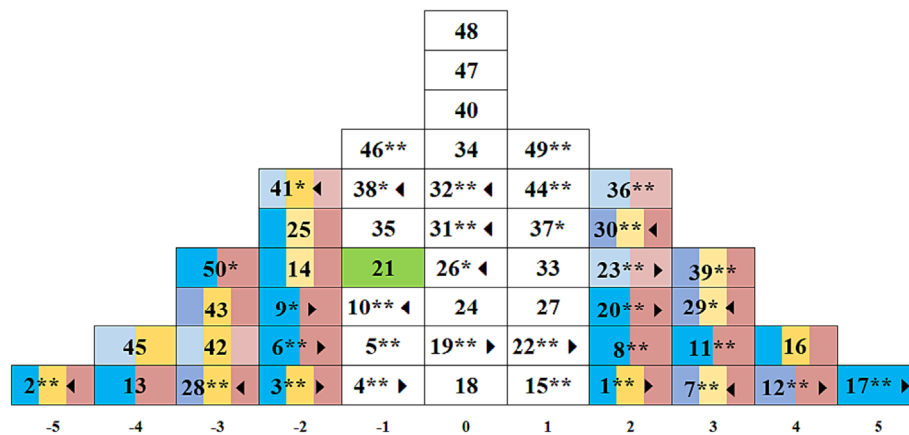


FIGURE 6 Composite Q-sort for Factor 2. Legend: *Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$; **Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$; ▶ z-score for the statement higher than in F1 and F3; ◀ z-score for the statement lower than in F1 and F3; ■ consensus statement.

conditions’ mode (e.g. S15: ‘If it is not possible to provide a better alternative, the local authorities must be wary of separating a child from their family of origin. This has influenced my decisions in respect of a number of cases’) were also valued with agreement distinctively.

Consensus and disagreement through the factors

Variance between the z-scores (Figure 8) shows that concerning the consensus and disagreement among the factors, S21, ‘In practice, “good enough parenting” can often represent a “lesser” version of parenting’, was a consensual statement. All the professionals represented by F1, F2 and F3 disagree with it. It was followed by S34 (‘I have seen cases

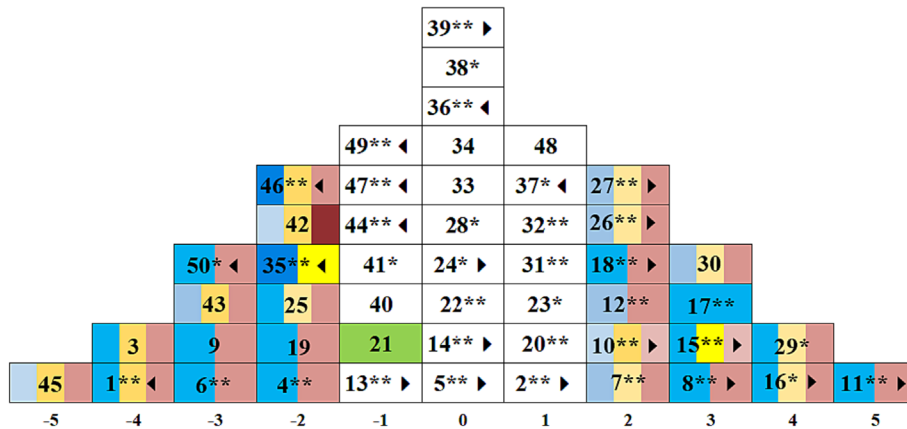


FIGURE 7 Composite Q-sort for Factor 3. Legend: *Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.05$; **Distinguishing statement at $P < 0.01$; ▶ z-score for the statement higher than in F1 and F2; ◀ z-score for the statement lower than in F1 and F2; ■ consensus statement.

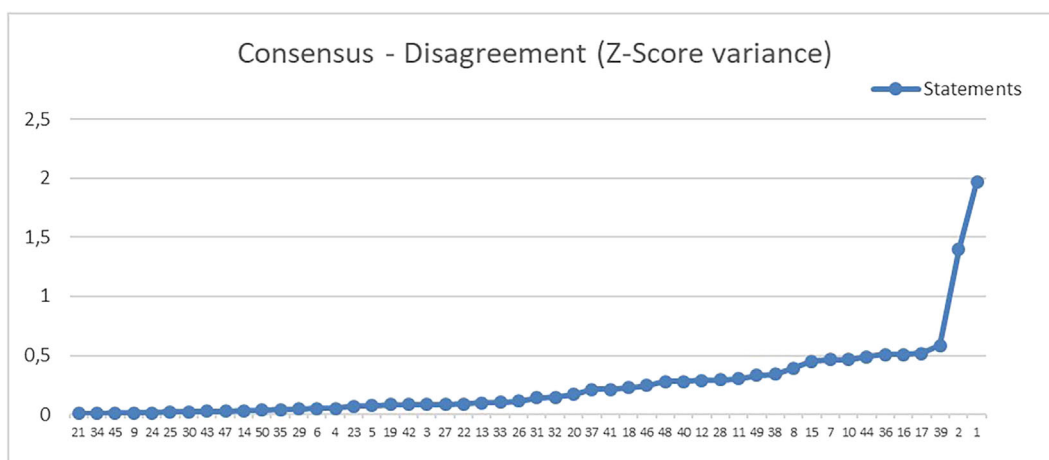


FIGURE 8 Consensus—Disagreement for statements (z-score variance between factors).

where, by the theoretical evidence, the child should not thrive but yet he or she has for whatever reason(s)’, valued with 0, and S45 (‘Sometimes it is better for the child to be left in a situation where they are at risk of sexual abuse rather than to be separated from someone they have a strong bond with’), valued with -5 . Both statements are related to criteria with origin in the ontosystem (child). Statement 9, the fourth more consensual (‘The criteria for triggering child protection procedures can vary depending on which senior manager is involved’) was valued with strong disagreement in all factors. Meanwhile, the statements that generated greater disagreement (S1, S2, S39 and S17) are related to professionals’ procedures (except S39) and were the distinguishing statements for Factor 2. Further, concerning the mode of criteria, criteria concerning parenting capacity were more frequently valued with agreement, whereas the ones concerning parenting practices were more valued with disagreement in all the factors extracted (as noted in the previous sections).

DISCUSSION

The factors identified revealed not only the different weights of the same criteria but also that professionals gave priority to different kinds of criteria, indicating lower consensus among them. The main cluster of responses (F1) valued, in first place, criteria derived from children and their wellbeing; it is important to refer that Portuguese law considers as a main principle to be followed the child’s best interest (Law 147/99; Law 142/15), and that could be a reason why this factor is the one that explains the higher portion of variance. The second (F2) considered the criteria related to the procedures adopted in different situations; and the third (F3) expressed a more systemic view, in the sense that it integrated criteria from different ecological levels, different modes and relative to the different time markers. Compared with F1

and F2, F3 did not clearly favour a type of evaluation criteria but rather expressed a perspective that integrated the great diversity of variables influencing the quality of parenting. Thus, F3 indicated the recognition that 'interconnectedness matters' (Lane et al., 2016, p. 621). However, of the three factors under analysis, F3 explained a lower percentage of variance, which demonstrated the preponderance of less integrative and more linear and prescriptive paths of information analysis (Caffrey & Munro, 2017). It is also important to note that F2, the second higher factor, included the statements that generated more disagreement, related with professional procedures: this may help to explain difficulties in interagency work, as probably the process of gathering and processing assessment and intervention information does not follow the same standards.

Regarding the mode of indicators, criteria related to parenting capacity generated more agreement and the criteria related to parenting skills and practices were subject to more disagreement in all of the factors. Effectively, these skills-focused criteria were highly sensitive to the specific needs of each child over time, as parents/caregivers are required to update their skills continually (Pereira & Alarcão, 2014; Pezzot-Pearce & Pearce, 2004). Consequently, it may be more difficult for practitioners to define the clear criteria for assessing parenting, thereby increasing their uncertainty on the adequacy of their findings related to interventions with long-term implications in the lives of children and families.

One of the main tasks in child protection is the communication among professionals and between professionals and families regarding the decisions taken/to be taken (Tilbury & Ramsay, 2018). The heterogeneity observed between the three factors, in terms of the different weighting of the criteria (which items were weighted and which items generated more agreement), may be a source of stress and associated with less confidence, lower cohesiveness of teams and poorer efficacy of the interventions, as the cooperating professionals may punctuate their objectives and roles in a way that is not always consistent. From this perspective, it becomes critical to foster spaces for the construction of common ideas and clarify the decision-making process (Robin, 2011).

CONCLUSION

The present study showed two highly relevant characteristics in the way social workers in the Portuguese child protection system considered the criteria for evaluating parenting. The first is that they have as main focus the child and the developmental implications of the child's lived experiences (namely, criteria related to the quality of care). The second is that they adopt a more restrictive, and less integrative view of the diversity of variables associated with the quality of parenting (as F1 and F2, explaining more variance of the results, are less integrative). With a less ecological view, it can be more difficult for professionals to acknowledge multifinality and equifinality (Watzlawick et al., 1967) as main features of parenting and child development, maintaining in many situations a linear causality perspective as the main reference to understand and intervene with family systems.

In a context where adherence and involvement in intervention may be permeated by norms on the adequacy of parental behaviours, cohesion among professionals plays a particularly relevant role. The construction of a shared discourse among the different actors is a prime task to promote greater wellbeing among CPW, as well as better results in interventions with children and families (Platt, 2012). A linear thinking, focused on the consideration of a limited scope of criteria, impedes the construction of visions of parenting that go beyond the aspects of individual privilege. It likewise contributes to the perpetuation of an adversarial system (Welbourne, 2016) among professionals themselves and between them and the families. As strong differences can become a threat to team cohesiveness and intervention success, rules and procedures are generated to deal with issues, making the system less flexible and sensitive to the specificities of each situation. The processes of differentiation of oneself (Bowen, 1980) do not necessarily need to be avoided, and dissenting voices do not need to be silenced (Munro & Hardie, 2019). Instead, differences should be considered in metacommunicational spaces. Supervision spaces and/or team meetings can serve as places for the construction and systematisation of common knowledge and practices (Borghet, 2014; Mandin, 2017), and the acknowledgement of the several influences present in child protection systems through the integration of first, second and third order thinking (McDowell et al., 2023).

Owing to space constraints, data were analysed globally, without differentiating them according to the areas of academic background or number of years of experience in child protection work. These variables may deepen the understanding of communication difficulties and articulation among professionals. This type of study can be extended to other professional groups that are less directly involved in social intervention with children and families, such as magistrates and academics.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

The research followed all the ethic standards and free informed consent was given by the participants.

ORCID

Dora Pereira  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0874-7929>

REFERENCES

- Abdullahi, A. (2021) 'Good enough parenting': social workers' experiences of assessing parenting in family safeguarding services (Doctoral dissertation, University of Hertfordshire). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.18745/th.25273>
- Banasick, S. (2018) *Ken-Q Analysis: a web application for Q methodology - reference guide v1.0.5*. Available at <https://github.com/shawnbanasick/ken-q-analysis/wiki> [accessed 12th december 2022].
- Bateson, G. (1979) *Mind and nature: a necessary unit*. New York: E.P. Dutton.
- Borghet, C.V. (2014) *Travailler ensemble en institution*. Bruxelles: Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles de Belgique.
- Botella, L. & Feixas, G. (1998) Teoría de los constructos personales: aplicaciones a la práctica psicológica. Barcelona.
- Bowen, M. (1980) *Differentiation of the self: the I position*. Medical College of Virginia.
- Branco, A., Pessina, L., Flores, A. & Salomão, S. (2004) A sociocultural constructivist approach to metacommunication in child development. In: Branco, A.O. & Valsiner, J. (Eds.) *Communication and metacommunication in human development*. Greenwich: Information Age Publishing, pp. 3–32.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. & Evans, G.W. (2000) Developmental science in the 21st century: emerging questions, theoretical models, research designs and empirical findings. *Social Development*, 9(1), 115–125. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9507.00114>
- Brunswik, E. (1956) *Perception and representative design of psychological experiments*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Budd, K.S. & Springman, R.E. (2011) Empirical Analysis of referral issues and 'Ultimate Issue' recommendations for parents in child protection cases. *Family Court Review*, 49(1), 34–45. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-1617.2010.01351.x>
- Caffrey, L. & Munro, E. (2017) A systems approach to policy evaluation. *Evaluation*, 23(4), 463–478. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356389017730727>
- Coordination des ONG pour les droits de l'enfant. (2011) *Dossier Parentalité et droits de l'enfant: 1. Définition et Historique de la Notion de parentalité*. Bruxelles: Coordination Des ONG Pour les Droits de l'enfant.
- Corby, B., Millar, M. & Pope, A. (2002) Assessing children in need assessments - a parental perspective. *Practice*, 14(4), 5–15. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503150208411538>
- Daniel, B. (2000) Judgements about parenting: what do social workers think they are doing? *Child Abuse Review*, 9(2), 91–107. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-0852\(200003/04\)9:2<91::AID-CAR594>3.0.CO;2-A](https://doi.org/10.1002/1099-0852(200003/04)9:2<91::AID-CAR594>3.0.CO;2-A)
- de Boer, C. & Coady, N. (2007) Good helping relationships in child welfare: learning from stories of success. *Child & Family Social Work*, 12(1), 32–42. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2006.00438.x>
- Dumbrill, G.C. (2006) Parental experience of child protection intervention: a qualitative study. [research support, non-U.S. Gov't]. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 30(1), 27–37. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2005.08.012>
- Forrester, D., Westlake, D. & Glynn, G. (2012) Parental resistance and social worker skills: towards a theory of motivational social work. *Child & Family Social Work*, 17(2), 118–129. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00837.x>
- Holt, K. & Kelly, N. (2018) Limits to partnership working: developing relationship-based approaches with children and their families. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 40(2), 147–163. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2018.1444447>
- Jones, D., Hadcroft, L. & Platt, D. (2019) Contemporary perspectives on parenting assessment. In: Horwath, I.J. & Platt, D. (Eds.) *The child's world*, 3rd edition. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 178–208.
- Kelly, G.A. (1955/1991) *The psychology of personal constructs*, Vol. 1 and 2. London: Routledge.
- Lane, D.C., Munro, E. & Husemann, E. (2016) Blending systems thinking approaches for organisational analysis: reviewing child protection in England. *European Journal of Operational Research*, 251(2), 613–623. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejor.2015.10.041>
- Mandin, P. (2017) Creating a space to think in adversarial contexts: researching network meetings in statutory childcare interventions. *Journal of Family Therapy*, 39(3), 329–347. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.12167>
- McDowell, T., Knudson-Martin, C. & Bermudez, J.M. (2019) Third-order thinking in family therapy: addressing social justice across family therapy practice. *Family Process*, 58(1), 9–22. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/famp.12383>
- McDowell, T., Knudson-Martin, C. & Bermudez, J.M. (2023) *Socioculturally attuned family therapy: guidelines for equitable theory and practice*, 2nd edition. Routledge.
- Meynckens-Fourez, M. (2011) L'institution comme système. In: Meynckens-Fourez, M., Vander Borghet, C. & Kinoo, P. (Eds.) *Éduquer et soigner en équipe*. Bruxelles: de Boeck, pp. 31–59.
- Munro, E. (1999) Common errors of reasoning in child protection work. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 23(8), 745–758. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134\(99\)00053-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0145-2134(99)00053-8)
- Munro, E. & Hardie, J. (2019) Why we should stop talking about objectivity and subjectivity in social work. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 49(2), 411–427. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcy054>
- Neil, P., Hodson, D. & Taylor, J. (2019) Collaborative practice and participation. In: Horwath, I.J. & Platt, D. (Eds.) *The child's world*, 3rd edition. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 159–174.
- Neimeyer, R. (2009) *Constructivist psychotherapy*. New York: Routledge.
- Pearce, J.W. & Pezzot-Pearce, T.D. (2007) *Psychotherapy of abused and neglected children*, 2nd edition. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Pereira, D. (2019) Parentalidade. In: Nunes, L., Fonte, C., Alves, S.P., Sani, A., Estrada, R. & Caridade, S. (coords). *Comportamento e saúde mental: dicionário enciclopédico* (pp. 57–59). Pactor.
- Pereira, D. & Alarcão, M. (2014) Parentalidade minimamente adequada: contributos para a operacionalização do conceito. *Análise Psicológica*, 32(2), 157–171. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.14417/ap.721>
- Pereira, D. & Alarcão, M. (2015) Guia de avaliação das capacidades parentais: estudo de validade ecológica. *Psicologia: Teoria E Pesquisa*, 31(2), 203–212. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1590/0102-37722015021900203212>
- Pezzot-Pearce, T. & Pearce, J. (2004) *Parenting assessments in child welfare cases: a practical guide*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Platt, D. (2012) Understanding parental engagement with child welfare services: an integrated model. *Child & Family Social Work*, 17(2), 138–148. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2012.00828.x>
- Rącz, A. (2019) Promoting complex needs, partnership and parenting in child protection. *Roma Tre-Press. La Ragioni di Erasmus*, 2(2), 29–44.

- Reder, P. & Duncan, S. (2003) Understanding communication in child protection networks. *Child Abuse Review*, 12(2), 82–100. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.787>
- Robin, D. (2011) La reunion d'équipe. In: Meynckens-Fourez, M., Vander Borghet, C. & Kinoo, P. (Eds.) *Éduquer et soigner en équipe*. Bruxelles: de Boeck, pp. 221–255.
- Sanders, J., Munford, R., Ballantyne, R., Henaghan, M., Allison, R. & Jackson, R. (2017) Conditional openness: young people define practices for successful child protection interventions. *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law*, 39(3), 261–278. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09649069.2017.1351738>
- Steinhauer, P., Leitenberger, M., Manglicas, E., Pauker, J., Smith, R. & Gonçalves, L. (1993) *Guide d'évaluation de la compétence parentale*. Toronto: L'Institut pour la Prévention de l'enfance maltraitée.
- Tilbury, C. & Ramsay, S. (2018) A systematic scoping review of parental satisfaction with child protection services. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 66, 141–146. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2017.10.010>
- Van Exel, J. & de Graaf, G. (2005) Q methodology: A sneak preview. Available from www.jobvanexel.nl
- Von Bertalanffy, L. (1968) *General system theory: foundations, development, applications*. New York: George Braziller.
- Watts, S. & Stenner, P. (2005) Doing Q methodology: theory, method and interpretation. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 2(1), 67–91. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088705qp022oa>
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J.H. & Jackson, D.D. (1967) *Pragmatics of human communication*. W.W Norton & Company.
- Welbourne, P. (2016) Adversarial courts, therapeutic justice and protecting children in the family justice system. *Child and Family Law Quarterly*, 28(3), 205–221.

How to cite this article: Pereira, D. (2024) What do you Think about Parenting? Challenges to Cohesiveness in Child Protection Teams. *Child Abuse Review*, 33(1), e2858. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/car.2858>