

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTING PRACTICES

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INTRODUCTION

Parenthood poses unique challenges and is complicated if parents are unable to provide adequately for their offspring's basic human needs. For the purpose of this article a distinction is made between poverty, referring to insufficient subsistence, and poverties, referring to deprivation in all life areas. Unmet needs of children implicate poverties in a wide array of spheres such as access to infrastructure, traditional family structures, parental warmth and guidance, technology and quality of life.

Roche and Leventhal (2009) state that families struggle to be healthy and productive when faced with economic constraints and Li-Grinning (2007) concluded that exposure to poverty-related stressors could be regarded as an indicator of children's behaviour problems. Results from studies by Shaw, Gilliom and Ingoldsby (2003) as well as Aquilar *et al.* (in Shaw *et al.*, 2003) report that parental inadequacies emerged as powerful predictors of juvenile delinquency. This concurs with the findings of Parke, Simpkins, McDowell, Kim, Killian, Dennis, Flyr, Wild and Rah (2004), who indicate that the accumulation of poverties increases the likelihood of children's' maladjustment.

South African children are increasingly regarded as being in need of care. As indicated by Louw, Van Ede and Louw (1998), South African families are increasingly challenged by financial problems and poverty. Socio-economic factors, such as family income and living conditions, have an influence on children's development. Many South African children come from deprived homes and communities, and consequently their parents do not have the means to provide them with educational toys, stimulate their language development or send them to preschool. Poverty can therefore be viewed as a factor generating children in need of care.

Children as well as experts in the field of child development have called for a new vision of parenting practices based on respect for the fundamental human rights of children (Choudhury & Jabeen, 2008). The main recommendation from this study was that there is an urgent need to relook at family dynamics and family practices from children's point of view (Choudhury & Jabeen, 2008). Although authors such as Visser and Moleko (1999) called for studies on South African school children, the literature review produced no such studies on children's perceptions of parental practices.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Children during middle childhood spend much more time away from home than they did in their earlier years. They also spend far less time with their parents. However, parents often have to protect the child and have to serve as a buffer between the child and the community. Parents are also responsible for teaching their children moral, religious and cultural values, how to behave towards authority, how to handle interpersonal relationships and how to resolve conflicts (Newman & Newman in Louw *et al.*, 1998:350).

Families who come from impoverished socio-economic backgrounds are more likely to be confronted with an inability to meet the individual members' needs adequately. These needs result in stressors, which, in turn, could affect the children's development and social relationships with peers and parents (Max-Neef, Elizalde & Hopenhayn, 1991; Visser &

Moleko, 1999). As such the link between family stressors and child development may be mediated indirectly by parental behaviour (Parke *et al.*, 2004). The presence of poverty increases the likelihood that other personal and situational determinants of parenting will act as risk factors rather than protective factors in children's and parents' lives (Rutter in Halpern, 1990). Patterson, Vaden, Griesler and Kupersmidt (1991) have found that children from low-income homes have fewer friendships both in and out of school than children from middle-income homes. Children from poor families may have homes which are not well equipped for accommodating children and their playmates, and parents may not encourage their children to bring friends home (Patterson *et al.*, 1991). Thus, economic disadvantage may decrease their opportunities for peer companionship and hamper their opportunities for learning many of the social skills necessary to maintain positive peer relations.

A study conducted by Coley and Hernandez (2006) concluded that fathers who are unemployed or inconsistently employed feel that they have inadequate resources to share with their children or do not fulfil societal expectations of a central paternal role. Furthermore, results from this study indicated that stressed parents are more hostile as well as less warm and nurturant. Such parents are also less likely to follow regular family routines. Brody and Flor (in Parke *et al.*, 2004) found that disruption in parenting can increase children's adjustment problems, including difficulties in peer relations, such as fewer close friendships and less perceived support from friends. Scaramella, Neppl, Ontai and Conger (2008) as well as Eamon and Mulder (2005) agree by stating that economic stress can disrupt effective parenting practices both directly and indirectly by increasing parental distress and family conflict. This may imply inadequate positive parental support, which is regarded as a catalyst for high-risk behaviour in young persons (Visser & Moleko, 2008).

Payne (1996) conceptualised that families who are exposed to poverty for two generations or longer inevitably adapt their social functioning in order to survive in their communities, and Visser and Moleko (1999) similarly argue that poverty has an effect on children's self-esteem and behaviour. Payne (1996) further postulates that children who are exposed to generational poverty have to master hidden rules, which are not necessarily interpreted accurately by others.

Children have been found to run away from their homes because of parental practices (Choudhury & Jabeen, 2008). From a human development perspective (Cheal, 2008; Louw *et al.*, 1998; Louw & Louw, 2007; Margow & Oxtoby, 1987), parents' guidance is therefore of the utmost importance – the nature of interaction, discipline and dealing with the child's behaviour and emotions have an impact on the success with which the developing child will negotiate challenges. The example set by parents is regarded as being an extremely important basis for modelling of interpersonal relations and appropriate social behaviour (Margow & Oxtoby, 1987; Will & Wrate, 1985). Therefore, child-rearing practices, as an environmentally orientated developmental process, play a decisive role in the child's development and how children carry themselves in life. The question then arises what children's perceptions of parenting practices are. Save the Children Sweden Regional Office for South and Central Asia in collaboration with its partners in South Asia (Choudhury & Jabeen, 2008) conducted a qualitative study which built a general picture of children's views and experiences, and the factors influencing their perception on parenting. It also focused on the extent to which parenting behaviours may vary according to cultural and socio-economic circumstances. The study demonstrated how gaining children's perspectives greatly increases understanding of the various parenting practices, showing that what children and young people think is not necessarily what adults think they do (Choudhury & Jabeen, 2008).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research question and objectives

The research question for this study was: What are the perceptions of children regarding parenting practices?

Design

Using a cross-sectional design, the qualitative study explored children's perceptions of their parents' parenting practices. A qualitative approach was chosen as the researchers attempted to "understand how people experience and interpret events in their lives" (Bernard & Whitley, 2002:34). The study incorporated a collective case study research design. A case study can be defined as "an exploration or in-depth analysis of a bounded system, or a single or multiple case, over a period of time" (Creswell in De Vos *et al.*, 2005:272). The use of a collective case study allowed the researchers to make comparisons between cases and concepts to be able to extend and validate findings.

Demarcation, participants and sampling

The explorative nature of the study as well as limited resources necessitated demarcation of the study. Participants were recruited from two primary schools in the rural area of Wellington in the Western Cape Province in South Africa. Although both schools are classified by the Department of Education as servicing middle-class residential areas, the majority of children attending School A come from historically disadvantaged families. Many of the parents work as farm labourers and approximately one third of the families are able to pay the annual school fee. School B is attended by children whose families reflect middle to higher socio-economic strata. The majority of parents are farm owners or professional people.

Sampling

Letters inviting parents to give permission for their children to participate in the study were sent to families at both schools. An availability sample of 211 children whose parents gave informed consent and who were present on the days on which the data were collected was drawn for the study. This type of sampling, also known as accidental sampling or convenience sampling, entails that the respondents are usually those who are nearest and most easily available (Judd *et al.* in De Vos *et al.*, 2005:202). Because of the nature of the environment in which the study was conducted, variables such as lack of school attendance, illiterate parents and apathy had to be taken into account when choosing a sampling method.

At the time of the study School A had 1 452 children enrolled, of whom 129 participated in the study. School B had 476 children of whom 82 participated in the study. Gender distinction was not considered to be relevant for the purpose of this study.

Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was obtained beforehand from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) and the two school principals. Parents of participants gave written informed consent and participants assented. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Written feedback was provided to the teachers and parents on request.

Data collection

Data were collected on school premises using semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. Individual interviews lasted between 25-60 minutes in accordance with each participant's work tempo. Permission to conduct focus group discussions at School B during

school hours could not be obtained and so no focus group discussions could be conducted at School B, as insurmountable transport problems would arise if these were to be conducted after school hours. Six focus group discussions were conducted during school hours at School A. One focus group with a purposive sample of 4-7 children was held with each grade.

Instruments

Junior Rotter Incomplete Sentences (Carne, 1949) and drawings (Wenck, 1984) were used. The drawings consisted of the Kinetic Family Drawing (Burns & Kaufman, 1972; Knoff & Prout, 2003) and three versions of the Draw-A-Person Technique (Psychological Seminars, 1992; Yama, 1990). The three versions consisted of: *Draw your Mother*, *Draw your Father* and *Draw What Happened When You Were Naughty*. These will be referred to as Draw-A-Person (Mother), Draw-A-Person (Father) and Draw-A-Person (Naughty). These psychometric instruments were applied through semi-structured interviews. Focus group discussions were used to triangulate the data. During data collection children's perceptions of the following were explored: the role of the mother, the role of the father, joined family activities and disciplinary measures.

Data analysis

Data obtained from the drawings and the Rotter sentences were analysed using the standardised formal assessment system of these psychometric instruments (Burns & Kaufman, 1972; Psychological Seminars, 1992). Focus group discussions were analysed using contents analysis. Utilizing Tesch (in Creswell, 2009), a coding scheme was applied to the categories and themes identified (De Vos in De Vos *et al.*, 2005; Grinnell, Williams & Unrau, 2010). The emergent understandings from the interviews and the focus group discussions were then compared with the literature as triangulation.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Themes resulting from the interviews and the focus group discussions are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
THEMES EXTRAPOLATED FROM THE DATA

THEME	KFD	DAP (M)	DAP (F)	DAP (N)	Rotter	Focus Groups
Family Time	x					x
Emotional Closeness	x					x
Perception of Mother as Caregiver	x	x				x
Perception of Father as Absent Figure	x		x			x
Corporal Punishment				x	x	x
Safety and Security					x	
Social Skills					x	

The results will be discussed accordingly.

DISCUSSION

The themes resulting from the data obtained are discussed to clarify children's perceptions of parental practices and are compared with the literature. Difference in perspectives of children from School A and School B are indicated. Participants' remarks are quoted to illustrate their perspectives.

Theme 1: Family Time

A significant finding at School B is that the majority of children drew their families going on special outings: *“The happiest time in my life was when we as a family went to Table Mountain”*. The majority of these children also indicated that their family does various other activities together such as watch television, do gardening or play together. Participants from School A did not portray extraordinary family activities, but instead indicated that the family goes to town to do chores or watch television together. Their perspective of family time is conceptualised around once-a-year activities such as holiday outings over the Christmas period or having a birthday party. Both these activities are deemed to be significant for the children at School A.

Theme 2: Emotional Closeness

Visser and Moleko (1999) hold the viewpoint that positive parental support is necessary for children’s development. In this study most of the participants expressed a need to have a close relationship with their mother/father and the need to spend more time with their parents – *“it makes me sad when I am alone at home”* and *“my happiest time is when we as a family eat together on Sundays”*. Furthermore, children verbalised that they want their parents to treat them as being special – especially on birthdays. Receiving gifts was also indicated as being important: *“it makes me feel happy when my parents give me hugs or presents”* and *“the happiest time is when it is your birthday”*. Most children expressed positive emotions towards their parents and perceive parents as the source of their contentment: *“I like it best when my family is at home”*. The majority of the participants also voiced concern about their parents’ wellbeing and happiness and verbalised disappointment about absent parents: *“it makes me sad if my father does not come home”* or *“my mother often leaves us alone when she goes to work”*.

It appears that children perceive their parents as the source of their contentment, thus concurring with Visser and Moleko’s (1999) viewpoint.

Theme 3: Perception of Mother as Caregiver

Participants from School B perceive the mother as the parent who is active within the home context in a variety of roles – *“my mother is always happy, she makes coffee and she loves shopping”*. These children’s perception that they are cared for is enhanced by the majority of these mothers personally fetching their children from school – *“my mother is always happy when she comes to fetch me in my father’s car”*.

In contrast, School A’s participants perceived mothers as being busy with chores: *“... cooking, washing the dishes or sweeping the house”*. Most children from school A are transported by designated drivers in 18-seater vehicles or in the form of a lift club and thus get re-united with their mothers later than children from School B, whose mothers fetch them from school. The perception of children in the lower-income school – that their mothers are busy and sad while they are at school – reflects their concern about their parents and their need for emotional closeness discussed under Theme 2: *“my mother feels sad when I am not at home and she is waiting for me”*. Payne (1996) described a situation similar to the perception of participants from School A when mentioning that families with generational poverty are optimally challenged by survival issues and thus do not have time or energy to also provide for the emotional needs of their children.

Theme 4: Perception of the Father as an Absent Figure

Although the majority of participants indicated their fathers as being absent, a contrast in the basis for this perception exists between the children from School A and School B. The majority

of children from School A come from non-traditional family structures, where fathers often do not reside with their biological children. Unemployment of their fathers has been indicated in some drawings as a concern the participants are faced with: “*my father does not have a job, so he sleeps all the time*”. Participants from this school indicated the fathers who were present in a generally more relaxed role: “*my father watches television*”, “*my father is sleeping*” or “*my father drives the car to take us to town*”. At School B the father figure was indicated as working long hours and additionally spending much time at home working on his computer: “*my father works until 18:00 every day*” and “*my father works on his lap top at home*”. The perceived absence of the fathers reflected by data from both schools could furthermore be indicative of a lack of the fathers’ involvement within the family context. The absence of father figures could thus become a further risk factor which arises, according to Visser and Moleko (1999) and Max-Neef *et al.* (1991), if the needs of children are not adequately met. The perception of participants in School B that fathers have to work after hours might reflect what Scaramella *et al.* (2008) and Eamon and Mulder (2005) refer to when they argue that economic stress impacts on effective parenting practices by increasing parental distress.

Theme 5: Perceptions on Corporal Punishment

Of the 211 participants, 202 indicated that their parents administer corporal punishment: “*I get a hiding every day, I feel sad*”. Although corporal punishment is thus perceived to be an accepted component of parenting practice, the children perceive this as traumatic and the majority indicated that the worst thing that ever happened to them was when they got a hiding or when they fell.

From the data it appears that communicating instructions about rules in the family are prevalent, communication about corporal punishment is perceived differently. The majority of children indicated that they receive punishment “*because I was naughty*” or “*because my mother or father was angry*”. Only in very few instances did the child indicate that the behaviour for which he/she was being punished, or the desired behaviour which would prevent repeated punishment, was identified or discussed. At School A the participants reported that they have no idea why they are getting punished, while at School B some participants reported that they receive an explanation of the reason for punishment – “*my mother will always tell me why I am in trouble*”. The lack of adequate open, direct communication stands in contrast with what Will and Wrate (1985) identify as an essential dynamic of effective family functioning. Payne (1996) similarly states that for a child to learn, instruction should consist of a stimulus (indicating what the child needs to do) followed by a meaning (clarifying consequences) and a strategy (operationalising the stimulus). This would require parents to indicate required behaviour, explain consequences if this is ignored, and ensuring that the child has mastered the steps constituting the expected behaviour.

In the majority of Draw-A-Person (Naughty) drawings the mother is portrayed as the bigger figure and the father is presented as smaller and in the background. This corresponds with the perception of mothers fulfilling the role of both affective caregiver and disciplinarian, regardless of whether a father is present or absent. Fathers are associated less prominently with the roles of disciplinarian and administrator of punishment: “*when I was naughty, my mother gives me a hiding*”. Family dynamics were displayed in some of the comments children rendered: “*I get very angry when my mother gives me and my sister a hiding*”, “*my mother is angry*” and “*no one knows that I want to run away from home*”. This supports Choudhury and Jabeen’s (2008) findings that parental practices can lead to children seeing no option other than

to leave home; this suggests that instruction of children as conceptualised by Payne (1996) is not realised around the issue of punishment.

Corporal punishment is furthermore perceived by the participants to be administered by a variety of adults other than parents as well as by siblings with items ranging from kitchen utensils to items of clothing such as shoes and belts to canes and sticks. The different forms of punishment received by participants reported (in decreasing order) in Table 2.

TABLE 2
TYPES OF PUNISHMENT ADMINISTERED

Type of punishment (in decreasing order):	Received by Participants at School A	Received by Participants at School B
Hit with an object (belt, cane, stick, shoe or wooden spoon)	Yes	Yes
Hit (by hand)	Yes	Not reported
Sent to room or bathroom / Time-out	Yes	Yes
Reduction in pocket money	Not reported	Yes
Forced to sit underneath the table	Yes	Not reported
Forced to wash in cold water	Yes	Not reported

Theme 6: Perceptions on Safety and Security in the Family

Most of the participants expressed some concern about safety and security. There was a noticeable variation in the perceptions of participants from the two schools.

Participants from School A mostly expressed concerns about how their parents managed their health and verbalised that they were afraid that their parents could die or become ill: *“I am concerned that something bad will happen to my family”* and *“I am afraid that my mother will die”*. Several of these participants also expressed concern about the impact of poverty: *“nobody knows that we do not have food at home”*. This reflects Payne’s statement (1996) that exposure to generational poverty forces families to focus on survival issues and prevents engaging in activities to broaden experiences and supply cognitive stimulation. At School B participants’ concerns were about the lack of security at their homes – *“I am worried that someone will burgle our house”*. This suggests that the participants’ do not experience their environment as safe, leading to them pondering in school what might be happening at home, adding to Payne’s (1996) reflection that poverty forces more time to be spent on survival issues.

In addition to these material concerns, participants from both schools expressed a lack of emotional security. This was portrayed by one child from school A verbalising: *“The worst thing that had ever happened to me was the day I was born”*. The comments of another epitomise his lack of emotional security stemming from not understanding parental behaviour: *“the worst thing that ever happened to me was when my dad took another wife”*. Participants from School B raised concerns reflecting insecurities arising from a different lifestyle: *“I like pizza and milkshakes, but I am concerned about my weight”*. This suggests that the participants’ main concerns are socially and financially associated.

Theme 7: Social Skills

The theme of play as a preferred activity both within and outside the family is consistent throughout: *“I like to play with my friends”* and *“I am happy when we play at home”*. A lack of social skills seems to be present especially within the sampled group of children at School A.

These participants perceive their social interaction to be challenging: “*my friends hit me all the time*”, “*my friends chase me away*”, “*I get angry when I get bullied and called ugly names*”, “*nobody knows I steal things*” and “*I threw a stone at someone*”. Feelings of inferiority and poor self-esteem also seem to be present in this group of participants: “*nobody wants to play with me*”, “*I want to run away from home*”, “*the worst thing that ever happened to me was that I was born*” and “*the other children talk about me*”. This reflects Payne’s statement that children from families who have been exposed to generational poverty learn to live by different rules, one of which is to have to fight physically for survival, and another which renders non-verbal communication more important than verbal communication (1996).

Shaw and Emery (in Parke *et al.*, 2004) stated that the number of family-level poverties a child had experienced was related negatively to the child’s perceived social competence. Findings at School A concur with the literature as most children present with a lack of social skills, as well as a feeling of inferiority and low self-esteem. Both Maslow (1950) and Towle (1945) emphasised that physical needs must be addressed before self-actualisation and cognitive understanding of the self and the external world can occur. Similarly, inadequate fulfilling of the basic human needs (Max-Neef *et al.*, 1991) impacts negatively on the successful completion of the developmental challenges, as set out in Erikson’s theory (1950), emphasizing that the adequate development and mastering of skills necessary to function within a particular culture and society should concur.

Children from School B were socially more competent and reported clear, direct communication with parents. These children also portrayed a quality of life in terms of family time and outings, access to infrastructure, facilities, technologies and financial security.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

Findings from this study suggest that children’s perceptions of their parents’ parenting practices vary in accordance with the socio-economic stratum of the family. Children in the higher-income families perceive their parents as actively engaging with them and as providing extraordinary stimulation even though the fathers are also perceived as absent. This group reflects the perception that lifestyle issues and safety within their community are a concern but that they feel contained by their parents. Because of their higher socio-economic stratum, these children experience fewer poverties and consequently have a greater potential to master their developmental challenges.

Children in lower-income families perceive fathers as being absent figures who are often unemployed and are prone to substance abuse. Mothers are perceived as having to manage the day-to-day running of family affairs in the time when they are not at work. There is perceived to be limited opportunity for parents to engage in activities of bonding with the children or broadening the child’s horizons and perceptions exist that parents are physically vulnerable. Socialising is perceived to be characterised by problems and the use of physical force during both socialisation and the administering of discipline are accepted. The socio-economic circumstances of their parents thus imply poverties which negatively impact on their ability to master developmental challenges. This has implications for the professions working with these children, specifically the social work profession. The difference between the two income groups in this study highlight the importance of being knowledgeable about a target group as well as ensuring the intervention is appropriate. Understanding the driving force of an individual is closely linked to the specific income group that individual belongs to – the social

worker needs to be able to understand this hidden language in order to assess and intervene appropriately.

It is recommended that further studies be undertaken to establish whether parents' perceptions of their parental practices correspond with the perceptions of their children. It is also recommended that the helping professions, specifically social workers, be engaged in understanding the hidden language of poverty and poverties in order to tailor-make interventions.

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