

The Social Work Assessment of Parenting: An Exploration

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Summary

The significance of parenting in the conduct of child-care practice is apparent in a range of legal and policy documents emanating from the government. This has been further emphasized in recent years in the refocusing debate emphasizing issues of need and support. While research in childcare has inevitably involved parenting (for example in relation to child protection), and as the broad concentration has progressed through issues of child protection and family support, this has not generally incorporated the social workers' construction of parenting, and the ways this is incorporated into, and informs, their practice actions. This is particularly interesting because this focus enables an examination of this construction in the light of broad themes about parenting in the psychological literature. This relates also, therefore, to the debate on (and use of) an Evidence Base for practice. This paper seeks to explore social workers' construction of parenting, and the way this 'feeds into' social workers' practice actions. The paper found that, while some of the constructions reflected themes in the psychological literature, social workers were rarely informed by overt reference to knowledge gained from this literature. The concept of a 'surface static notion of parenting'—one which restricted the social workers' capacity to respond positively to the needs of parents underlying their parenting—was developed as a way of understanding social work constructions and practice actions in relation to parenting. While this is one study, the 'surface static notion of parenting' represents a means for understanding one way in which social workers' constructions impinge on their practice with parents. The implications of this approach are explored. It is practically axiomatic that the assessment of parenting is a major component of child care practice. This assessment is a key element in the Framework for Assessing Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, 1999a), which, alongside the revised Working Together to Safeguard Children sets out to provide the new 'refocused' emphasis on looking at the needs of vulnerable children and families in order to promote their well-being and ensure that 'optimal outcomes will occur' (Department of Health, 1999b). This, in turn, reflected the earlier 'Messages From Research' document (Department of Health, 1995). Underlying these

developments is the philosophy of The Children Act, 1989, that 'the best place for the child to be brought up is usually in his own family' (Department of Health, 1991a). A concern to assess and promote the upbringing of children by their families is apparent in the Family Support provisions of the Act (section 17) whereby intervention should enhance 'the parents' capabilities and confidence so that they may provide effectively for the child's welfare' (Department of Health, 1991:11). Social workers are also directed to consider parenting in the light of whether it is 'abusive' (s47, The Children Act 1989). The issue of significant harm emerges, and compulsory intervention may occur, where they have considered that harm is attributable to the care being given 'not being what it would be reasonable to expect' a parent to provide (s31(2), The Children Act 1989). This is about 'good enough' or 'reasonable' parenting. The assessment of parenting, therefore, has a central legal position in childcare practice. Research studies of social work practice in child and family care have inevitably involved parenting, but could be classified as occupying two broad streams: issues of child protection and secondly, concerns for family support. However, as evidenced from the following illustration of these broad streams, a significant omission is made—that of the social workers' construction of parenting and the ways that this construction is incorporated into and informs practice action. This paper draws on a qualitative study of social workers' conceptualisation of parenting, and seeks to make observations of the relationship of this construction with the conduct of practice in the area of assessing parenting. A particular focus is given to how far and in what ways social workers base their assessments on key themes from the psychological parenting literature.

Dominant streams

Up to the refocusing debate, research has generally focused on the concepts of abuse, risk and need. This is perhaps not surprising as research has understandably taken its 'lead' from the way in which familial and child-care problems are constructed in the legislation. Thus, for example, we have studies of partnership (Thoburn *et al.*, 1995), the child protection process (Gibbons *et al.*, 1995), parental perspectives of the process (Farmer and Owen, 1995; Cleaver and Freeman, 1995) and local authorities' and social workers' interpretations of need (Aldgate and Tunstill, 1995; Coulton *et al.*, 1995). These studies have tended not to focus in detail on parenting skills. Thus, for example, Farmer and Owen (1995) described a range of factors discussed in case conferences, including the parent's behaviour and 'parenting skills'. However, while these skills were mentioned as a focus for social work attention, their nature, and assessment by practitioners were not the subject of analysis.

More recent research within the broad concerns of child protection has given way to a formulation, to a considerable degree, around a common theme of a concern for family support as a response to need (Aldgate and Bradley, 2000; Brandon *et al.*, 1999; Aldgate and Tunstill, 2000; Thoburn *et al.*, 2000). Aldgate and Bradley (2000), for example, focus on accommodation as a family support service, while both Brandon *et al.* (1999) and Thoburn *et al.* (2000) focused on the level and type of intervention and the integration or balancing of family support and child protection. Aldgate and Tunstill (2000) focused directly on services provided for family support, specifically excluding child protection cases.

As with the earlier studies, however, although parenting inevitably formed an aspect of the research, this did not include the social workers' construction of parenting. Thus, while Aldgate and Bradley (2000) show family support was used to deal with broad categories of parenting difficulties, they did not make the link between these categories and a detailed examination of the social workers' construction of parenting. Furthermore, Aldgate and Tunstill (2000) and Thoburn *et al.* (2000) display a common interest in partnership with parents (both have reservations about social work performance in this area), and note the importance attached to casework, an aspect of which is liable to involve a concern with parenting.

The major exception to this is Sheppard (2001) whose work on depressed mothers has involved a concern for the way the mothers, on whom his study concentrated, were constructed by social workers. His study showed a link between these constructions and the practice strategies of social workers. However, while depression is a major issue in childcare, his concern was how the mothers were constructed as depressed individuals, and his classification (of genuinely depressed, troubled and troublesome and stoics) reflected this concern with depression. Furthermore, his was a classification of parents rather than parenting.

Two others have focused on parenting in this way. However both methodologies used previously constructed statements and themes of parenting, rather than taking an inductive approach whereby themes emerge from the social workers own characterization of parenting. Thus Pitcairn *et al.* (1993) compared accounts of parents and social work evaluation of childcare in relation to forty-three cases. However this study was carried out around the predefined themes of affection, control and discipline, physical care, protection, stimulation and expectations, with the result that social work responses were made around those themes. Daniel's (2000) focus on social work beliefs about parenting used an opinion survey containing a selection of previously constructed judgements about parenting. These judgements were, furthermore, linked with views about the child protection system as a whole, and were thus abstracted from assessments and decisions made in the actual conduct of practice. We do not, for example, know whether, and how, these beliefs might influence the case by case performance of practice in the real world.

The absence of a focus on social workers' own construction of parenting and the connection between this construction and social workers' practice strategies excludes a potential third stream from the discourse. What, we might ask, is the link between social workers' construction of parenting and the child protection response, or use of family support? How does this influence the conduct of practice? In view of the significance currently ascribed to the use of research and evidence in practice this would suggest an interest in psychology, particularly social workers' understanding and use of the psychological literature on parenting in their assessment and decision making. It makes sense, therefore, to focus not only on social workers' construction of parenting but to do so in the light of key themes from contemporary psychological literature. This paper has an exploratory and inductive element, so it does not pretend to be comprehensive. Rather it attempts, through drawing on social workers' accounts, to identify some key themes in the conduct of practice.

Some key themes in the psychological parenting literature

Parenting is considered largely in terms of the facilitation of child development. Research into the effects of parenting styles have indicated that it is behaviour which is 'sensitive' to children's needs and 'responsive' to the demands of different development tasks that promotes 'optimal child development' (Belsky, 1984; Rutter, 1975, 1986; Rutter *et al.*, 1983; Melhuish, 1998). Ainsworth *et al.* (1978) observed that securely attached infants had mothers who consistently demonstrated four dimensions of sensitivity, responsiveness, accessibility and co-operativeness in their caregiving. Mothers of insecure-ambivalent infants showed less responsiveness and mothers of insecure-avoidant infants were more rejecting with less emotional warmth and expression (Melhuish, 1998). Maccoby and Martin (1983) similarly emphasized 'reciprocity' in parent-child interaction, with parents maintaining security and consistency, and communicating and problem-solving with their children. Quinton and Rutter's (1988) study into parenting breakdown similarly included parenting measures of: social communication and emotional expressiveness; joint play; disciplinary control and sensitivity to the child's cues, approaches and distress.

Studies have also noted that some children are subject to particular styles of parenting that will adversely affect their development (Gough *et al.*, 1987; Creighton and Noyes, 1989; Egeland *et al.*, 1983; Claussen and Crittenden, 1991; Gibbons and Gallagher, 1993). The 'Child Protection: Messages from Research' document (Department of Health, 1995) highlighted a style of parenting which is lacking in warmth and consistency, excessively critical and punitive as being particularly harmful to children. 'Parenting' has therefore become to be understood as a 'task', with those dimensions of sensitivity to the child's needs, social communication and emotional expressiveness, and disciplinary control, operating as aspects of that task (Rutter, 1985).

More recently there has been some consensus that parenting is itself situated within a relationship which is multiply determined, and that the interaction of these 'determining factors' in increasing risk or acting as compensatory 'buffers', is crucial to an understanding of the parenting process (Jenner and McCarthy, 1995; Quinton and Rutter, 1988; Cicchetti and Rizley, 1981). As such, parenting is not 'a quality that someone does or does not possess, but a relationship that responds to fluctuations in other relationships' (Reder and Lucey, 1995, p. 13). The currently favoured ecological model of Belsky and Vondra (1989) groups the determinants of parenting into 'the characteristics of the parent', 'the characteristics of the child' and 'the sources of stress and support in the wider social environment'.

In terms of the 'characteristics of the parent', the way in which a parent manages the parenting task is widely regarded as being influenced by the quality of care that they received as a child (Reder and Lucey, 1995, p. 6). Particular significance is given to how parent's 'internal working models' of attachment relationships determine their sensitivity to their child's attachment needs and behaviour. However, evidence of the intergenerational transmission of severe parenting difficulties is inconclusive (Rutter and Quinton, 1984; Quinton and Rutter, 1988). The parent's

current psychosocial functioning is considered to affect the quality of parenting behaviour (Rutter and Quinton, 1984; Quinton and Rutter, 1988; Cassell and Coleman, 1995). The research literature deals predominately with the effects of depression upon childcare, with most studies focusing on mothers (Cassell and Coleman, 1995). Depressed mothers tend to be more critical and inconsistent, less emotionally available, and show heightened sensitivity to a child's negative or distressed behaviour (Cox, 1988; Cummings and Davies, 1994; Griest *et al.*, 1980).

Several studies have noted the impact of this emotional unavailability and irritability upon the child's emotional and social development (Rutter and Quinton, 1984, Griest *et al.* 1980). For example, Richman *et al.* (1982) found that those mothers of children with behavioural problems at three, four and eight had significantly higher rates of depression.

Parenting is a two-way process of interaction, which is influenced by the child, as well as the parent (Maccoby and Martin, 1983). Behavioural studies and intervention repeatedly point to how these interactions can result in 'vicious cycles' (Dumas, 1992; Patterson, 1976). The parenting literature also considers that a child's experience and internal representation of relationships with attachment figures influences the way children relate to their parents, peers and other adults (Bretherton, 1985; Jenner and McCarthy, 1995).

Sources of stress and support in the wider social environment also impact on the quality of the parent-child relationship, in particular at the level of the family. The extent of family cohesiveness or 'togetherness' has particular 'protective effects' (Mortimer *et al.*, 1988; Katz *et al.*, 1999; Sweeting and West, 1995). There are also strong associative links between the quality of marital relationship and the quality of the parent-child relationship with conflict associated with a child's adjustment and difficulties (Hetherington and Jodl, 1994; Jenner and McCarthy, 1995; Hetherington, 1981; Wallerstein and Kelly, 1980). The literature also emphasizes obtaining 'internal' definitions of parenting, as families create their own rules of interaction to which only they can give meaning (Hess, 1981; Stratton and Hanks, 1995). The importance of this is evident in the consistent differences in the behaviour that abusive parents attribute to their child compared to other parents (Stratton and Hanks, 1995).

Social support is also considered to have an impact on parental functioning, which can be understood by distinguishing between the 'type of support' from the 'source' (Thorpe and Elliott, 1998; Sheppard, 1994). For example, Brown *et al.* (1986) found that a confiding relationship with husband, partner or other close friendship at the point of crisis offered protection against depression, whereas Woods (1985) found that a 'less intense emotional support' from other members of the social network acted as a 'buffer' at times of stress.

Parenting capacity is affected by a higher degree of stress and disadvantage. Research has consistently shown a disproportionate number of poor families in contact with social services departments (Department of Health, 1995; Gordon and Gibbons, 1998; Bebbington and Miles, 1989). However, this increased referral rate could be caused by the sheer visibility to professionals of the problems they face (Gordon and Gibbons, 1998).

It is important to note criticisms concerning the generalizability of such parenting studies, in particular at the use and reproduction of dominant ideologies about motherhood and 'ideal families' (Nicolson, 1993; Phoenix *et al.*, 1991). The studies of 'parenting' are confined to a limited population of parents, particularly the values and behaviour of white, US middle-class mothers (Phoenix *et al.*, 1991; Phoenix, 1986). Mothers were identified as being the parent who was closely involved (and therefore available) with their child during the day. This both assumes and places mothers, as opposed to fathers or other relationships as being the central influencing factor in the care and development of children (Woollett and Phoenix, 1991). The legacy of this gendering of the parenting task is evident by the finding that social work with 'parents' usually means that work is carried out solely with 'mothers' (O'Hagan and Dillenburg, 1995). However, despite this criticism there is clear evidence from social work studies that mothers are overwhelmingly the primary caregivers (Packman, 1986; Hardiker *et al.*, 1991; Sheppard, 1997).

Furthermore, many of the earlier studies also excluded the experiences of black, lone and working class parents, both in the US and in other parts of the world as it was deemed/assumed that these experiences were likely to be different (due to social disadvantage) to 'normal parenting processes' (Woollett and Phoenix, 1991, p. 21). In view of the social disadvantage of the social work client group, we may have reservations about the applicability of this psychological knowledge base as a guide to practice but in the spirit of current policy accept that this is 'the best available evidence' about what is good for children (Department of Health, 1999a, ch. 5:7).

Methods and outline of the study

The study was carried out between 1999 and 2000 in a social services department that covered an urban area containing two large towns in which tourism was a major source of income. This was at a time when the refocusing debate was becoming known and the document 'Child Protection: Messages from Research' (Department of Health, 1995) had been widely disseminated. The population of the area was 120,000, with black individuals comprising only 0.7 per cent. The social work department had two Child and Family Care teams comprising 27 social workers. The research focused on cases where social workers had completed, or nearly completed an assessment of a family's circumstances. The study sought to understand the assessment of parenting within the context of social and familial problems as they appeared on a case by case basis. Interviews were conducted with 15 social workers from the two child and family care teams on 27 cases of parental behaviour towards children. All these children had, at some point (in the assessment process) been on the child protection register and four were accommodated. Generally the main caretaker was the mother, although there were three cases in which the social worker perceived the mother and father to be equally sharing the care of the child. Hence the parenting reported in this study is predominately that of the mother.

Analytic tactics of theoretical sampling and constant comparative analysis from the grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Glaser and Strauss, 1967)

were used to obtain a diversity of views to develop theoretical insights. Since the study was exploratory in purpose, there was a concern to have a range of experiences from which to uncover such insights, rather than to sample multiple cases and look for the frequency of responses. Therefore, while the study focused on situations described by social workers as routine, or typical of the kinds of assessments they carried out, the inclusion of more than one case described by social workers as 'particularly complex', enabled us to extend the theoretical sampling by not always focusing on the most routine or typical situations.

The research was carried out through the use of in-depth interviews (Silverman, 1993; Miller and Glassner, 1997). In order to facilitate data sufficient in both depth and range, a small number of semi-structured questions were used to aid the researcher address the intellectual and social dynamics of the interview situation. Generally broad areas were covered, while nevertheless seeking to follow the social workers' own leads, rather than anticipate responses (Layder, 1993, p. 41). All interviews began with a 'warm up' question (Mason, 1996, p. 44) which asked the social workers to explain the 'main problems' within the family's situation. This aimed to ascertain the social worker's perception of the psycho-social context in which the parenting occurred, although a short demographic schedule to collect demographic data (Gibbons *et al.*, 1990) was also used at the end of the interview, in order not to influence the answers given (Flick, 1998, p. 90). Other questions focused on the parenting being given: identifying factors present for it to be deemed 'good enough' or 'not good enough', what factors swung that decision, and whether formal theories or knowledge were used to understand the parenting.

In using the constant comparative method for analysis, 'instances' were compared, which demonstrated social work experiences, definitions or perspectives as they emerged at any point across the data. This principle of comparing 'instances' rather than 'individuals' is described by other researchers (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Mason, 1996; Finch and Mason, 1990) and seemed particularly suited to this project of grounding perspectives in the situations of clients and social work practice. Strauss and Corbin's (1990) systematic strategy of open coding, followed by axial coding was used to label first the significant issues in the text as they arose on a sentence or paragraph basis, and then the differing facets and conditions that gave rise to those categories. The literature was used to pinpoint existing differing facets to categories, thereby ensuring that differences as well as similarities were highlighted within the act of comparing data. Analysis stopped once no new insights seemed to emerge.

The social work conceptualization of parenting

The social workers were asked to describe and give their opinion on the parenting that occurred within the case that they brought forward. The analysis revealed four types of expectations that underlay judgements both of parenting deemed good enough and that deemed not good enough.

1 The expectation to 'prevent harm'

The overriding concern for the social workers when judging parenting behaviour was the capacity of the parent to prevent harm occurring to their children: social workers made sense of situations in terms of whether the legal guidance 'abuse' categories of 'physical injury', 'sexual abuse', 'emotional abuse' and 'neglect' were evident (cf Parton, 1991). They used the law as a lens through which to view parenting and did so in two ways: in terms of the presence or absence of abusive behaviour (an aspect of parenting) and the impact on the child. These two facets are evident, for example, in the following statements from social workers:

When you get involved in a family . . . you address those [issues] as they come up or you put them to one side and maybe categorise them. There are different areas, aren't there, of sexual, physical and emotional abuse . . . and it might depend on what you're looking at . . . you know. . . . In this case it was definitely neglect and . . . um . . . emotional abuse.

So when you say at what point . . . you could say when the parenting clearly wasn't good enough because this daughter had been abused by mum's partner who she supported throughout in prison. She says she doesn't accept what her eldest daughter is saying. He has now been in prison for 9 years so the court obviously believed her . . . So the parenting not being good enough, well, I mean, at the point of disclosure. She obviously hadn't protected her daughter and didn't seem to be even willing to consider the possibility.

Parenting actions were constructed in terms of whether they were abusive or not abusive, rather than as graduations in the quality of adequate parenting as is found in the parenting literature, suggesting the impact of legal or quasi legal constructions of parenting (the latter evident, for example through definitions of abuse in the Working Together Document (Department of Health, 1999)).

2 The expectation to know and be able to meet appropriate development levels

The failure to protect from harm was, at times, according to social workers, attributable to parents having little understanding of their child's stage of development. One feature was a failure of a parent to recognize or provide an appropriate level of supervision in relation to the development age/needs of the child, which was often associated with parents actively resisting social worker's expectations of what a child could safely do. Parents' ideas of 'encouraging resourcefulness and independence', such as one example provided by a social worker of a five-year-old child cooking chips in oil in a chip pan, clashed with social workers' concerns about danger to the child.

Nevertheless social workers sought to understand the parents' positions, reducing the potential for conflict. There was an attitude among some of the social workers that these parents needed to have a 'fair chance' if they were to succeed at being parents, particularly where mothers were seen as 'under pressure'.

Social worker: She was confident that the people she told to supervise were okay and we didn't agree about that . . . the point I was making was that the people left in charge . . . that somehow the services were called out because there were problems, so clearly they were not suitable. But obviously she thought they were. You know the police were called out a couple of times, there was a fifteen and sixteen-year-old there and there was absolute mayhem.

Researcher: What would she say after that?

Social worker: Well, she'd say it was okay, and I felt that she was desperate to go out twice a week, that was her time to herself, which you could understand . . . Right no problem. The problem was who she was leaving in charge . . . The fact that she needed a break, who wouldn't?

A second dimension of social workers' developmental concerns was where a delay in growth and development was a result of parenting deemed not good enough. Playing with the child could be a key factor.

Social worker: She's [child] not being helped. To her, [mother] discipline was important. She didn't feel things like teaching the child, helping the child play with toys, things like that, were not important things. The child could barely play with toys . . . was what the foster carer said.

In some cases social workers drew on the judgements of other professionals, such as health visitors, to determine whether and how a child's development was delayed, particularly in relation to the child's physical growth. Often, especially with school-age children, social workers drew on their own experience as a parent or being parented (rather than drawing on the psychological literature), or they drew from other cases, which inevitably meant that judgements had an idiosyncratic element. No social workers made reference to research based instruments.

Social worker: When I first got into working with children, I think I did my social work training at a point where I had a young daughter. I suppose I see my own children, I have got ideas. I have got a kind of baseline for parenting . . . Well I have got a baseline about children's development and stuff and I have got some ideas about that from my own kids.

Researcher: So you would generally use that as a yardstick?

Social worker: I would use it as a yardstick, but I wouldn't feel that anyone who doesn't send their kids to sort of ballet lessons is a bad parent.

3 The expectation to provide routinized and consistent physical care.

Routinized and consistent physical care was generally considered where children had been removed due to physical injury and the assessment focused on the potential for the children to be cared for at home. Parents were expected at least to be able to communicate that routines are important, what those routines should be and to demonstrate their capacity to carry out these routines. Routines and structure were key elements of the social work discourse.

Researcher: What would have to happen for you to be sure that he is good enough?

Social worker: He'd need to be able to demonstrate that he is able to provide the children with a home environment in which their needs were met.

Researcher: What would those needs be?

Social worker: Um . . . security, stable environment . . . um . . . being able to use him as a secure base, upon him being there. Being put to bed at night, washed.

Social worker: I would have to expect to see some sort of . . . structure a bit there, I mean it is chaotic and a child cannot live in that.

Researcher: Mm . . . Can you give me an example of what that structure might be?

Social worker: If you ever make an appointment or anything with her she'd never possibly turn up on time, and not turn up at all. And it would be the same with Jane [child] she wouldn't possibly get her to nursery on time. Sometimes she would. And it would be your fault because you hadn't rung the nursery . . . and I would say 'yes, she is booked in.'

'Not meeting the child's needs' invariably referred to a lack of routine and consistency and that the child's emotional needs for a sense of safety and security were not being met, though this could be expressed in vague ways. The social workers often spoke about the difficulty in making sense of the sheer complexity of interrelated problems within families. This led to constant monitoring and checking, until often a point was reached where that harm, or potential for harm, seemed too great.

Social worker: You have to take a risk and sometimes you give people the benefit of the doubt. But . . . if there is something wrong, it will always come up anyway. I mean, obviously in child protection . . . we could like monitor and reassess and monitor with you and assess it and actually over time we got enough to say right, actually we are going to remove this child.

In the absence of both evidence and certainty of understanding about how or why harm is occurring, all the social worker can do is 'take a risk'. This social worker, like others, felt vulnerable to criticism that the child's welfare was not being adequately promoted or protected and guilty because they did not feel that the situation has been effectively resolved.

4 The expectation to be emotionally available and sensitive

For some social workers it was insufficient for a parent simply to love a child. They needed to have more insight into the emotional reasons for a child's behaviour, which took them beyond physical care and to demonstrate a level of affect and interest in the parent-child interaction. Hence the frequent statement: that the parent (usually the mother) 'was putting their needs before the child's needs'.

Social worker: Her perception [was] . . . I love him, I wouldn't do anything to hurt him. But she would lock him in his bedroom. Wouldn't feed him. And also he couldn't speak. She obviously didn't spend a lot of time talking to him or looking through books or feeding his imagination. It was just a hindrance and that was because she was so wrapped up in her own needs.

Past experience and parental functioning

The definitions of parenting were influenced, therefore, to a considerable degree, by legal and quasi-legal based constructions. However, 'making sense' involves going beyond the mere descriptive: an account requires an understanding of how matters (in this case parenting) are as they are (Sheppard, 1995). This involves some understanding of the ways social workers explained ('made sense of') parenting, and responded to the situations. This, it will be appreciated, involves links with both (broadly speaking) child protection and family support responses. However, our focus here is more on the social workers' 'psychological appreciation' of the parent. One major way social workers made sense of problems of parental functioning involved whether the parent was psychologically 'damaged' or 'disturbed' through abuse, or a lack of consistency or emotional warmth in their own childhood.

Social worker: What else did I look at? Childhood . . . what they brought from their own experiences of parenting . . . Both of them had difficult childhoods, but the father brought far less problems. Although his mother and father had broken up in his mid teenage years and that had been quite difficult for him . . . Of the two he is much less damaged. She is . . . a very damaged lady, very immature, very suspicious, quite unable . . . until now . . . and I am hopeful of this relationship . . . she hasn't demonstrated any ability to sort of form a secure, stable, satisfying relationship and maintain it.

An alternative was that early experience provided modelling for future parenting. The social workers, as illustrated below, seemed to make sense of the behaviour of parents who were punitive or neglectful in terms of a lack of 'knowledge' through the absence of a role model.

Social worker: Underneath that there was no structure for Jane at all. Jane's mother says that she'll bring herself up. Which is probably what happened with mother because mother obviously didn't have a particularly good parenting role model herself. And not a consistent one either, because if she was in and out of care and changing foster carers all the time in her young life, then she would not have a consistent role model to follow.

These two types of explanations draw on two implicit competing theoretical orientations: psychoanalysis and social learning theory (Kline, 1972; Bandura, 1962). While, however, assessment often drew on learning theory, this did not emerge through intervention or treatment. Moreover, the assessment was of parents' ability to carry out the parenting task, rather than how other factors may determine the quality of those skills (as indicated by the parenting literature).

In most cases, social workers felt this 're-learning' failed through the parent not engaging in the work. By far the dominant interpretation was that the parents were somehow actively avoiding a full commitment to the work because this would mean reflecting on potentially painful reasons for deficits in their parenting, as with the following social worker, who made sense of the inability to engage in terms of the impact of previous damaging experiences and a reluctance to resolve them.

Social worker: My feeling is that she needs to do some individual work. A lot is tied in with her family history. And that has never got off the ground. We have tried to get it off the ground. And I feel that she is not going to move in her parenting because my feeling is that she understands how to parent, she knows what the children need, but something is blocking her from doing it.

Linking intervention with the construction of parenting

Having made sense of poor parental functioning in terms of psychological damage, there was little evidence of attempts through intervention to address these deeply ingrained psychological needs, either through direct (social) work or through referral for specialist psychotherapy or counselling. Clinical psychologists and psychotherapists were used for 'expert opinion' (in two cases), but this was in relation to obtaining judgements on a parent's capacity to change their behaviour, and not to offer treatment (usually when the local authority had initiated care proceedings in respect of a child).

There was therefore considerable incoherence between the intervention strategy and the social worker's construction of parenting. This lack of coherence presented problems to the social worker, as the focus of intervention consisted of requiring parents to change their behaviour. Social workers seemed to lack a psychologically informed strategy for responding to parenting problems. In the absence of a work strategy for dealing with the issues, the social workers relied, at the level of a 'psychological appreciation' on exhorting the parent to change, of seeking to 'get them' to take responsibility. If, as was usually the case, this did not work the social workers were left perplexed, feeling powerless and unable to respond constructively.

Social worker: I was trying to build on what she had, I mean, because she loved her son. But the problem was, love was not enough. And whatever we did, didn't help facilitate her to move on from sitting staring into space. Basically she wasn't interested . . . I have actually agonised because of this . . . I worked with the family, primarily the mother and the boy for something like two years . . . to get her to . . . to get her sounds awful really, I suppose, for her to try and perhaps gain something from the experience.

It is difficult to see how parents can be expected to change within this rigid response strategy. It is in this context perhaps that we can understand, better, the issue of resistance identified by social workers. While the underlying factors that contribute to its existence remain unlocked, families become embattled and bitter. Indeed a major element in the construction of parenting considered not good enough was where parents were deemed to be 'not working with the social worker'. Generally, the use of this phrase was associated with two types of behaviour from the parents. The first was a sullen, passive refusal to listen to the social work explanations or services being offered. The second was a blatant aggression, involving shouting and swearing. In both instances the social workers felt that the parents were misrepresenting the information as criticism, and ignoring the spirit in which it is offered—as the social worker wanting to 'help' or 'support':

Social worker: I mean it is part of the problem . . . I mean her communication is odd . . . you know . . . She doesn't communicate in what we would call a reasonable way. Sometimes she can. Sometimes I will go and see her and we will have a lovely conversation. She will be nice and open and I think I'm getting somewhere. But then another day, if she's in a bad mood or if she . . . oh I don't know what makes her like it . . . But she can just be infuriating and stubborn and its like she thinks you are attacking her. You know . . . everything you say, she just becomes really defensive.

The result, as this next social worker exemplifies, was that the parent was not seen as being reasonable, but as actively hostile and obstructive, behaviour which perhaps inadvertently continued and encouraged the view that the problems within the family were personality-based.

Social worker: A reasonable parent wouldn't have told me last week to fuck off. I'd say 'Look the school are really keen to see you. It is not all bad. The teacher said please tell Mrs Smith that there are a lot of good things as well, but we are really worried and need to talk to her'. I didn't expect her to say 'what do you want? Sod off!'

Conclusion

We must be aware of the limitations to this study. It was, first of all, exploratory, focusing on only one department. The social workers involved in the study effectively volunteered their time and as such we might expect these social workers to be sufficiently interested in research procedures that there may be a bias to this preference in their responses. Other reservations concern ethnicity. The data do not include parenting assessments of ethnic minority families. Despite these reservations, it seems important to bear in mind the research goal of uncovering theoretical insights within a developing conceptual space. Inevitably this area will need further expansion, honing and study.

Except where they were using instruments required by department procedure, and which were specifically infused with psychological content (such as the 'Looking After Children' instruments), social workers hardly ever referred to psychological evidence, derived from the literature, as a way to structure their understanding of a case, or to inform their intervention strategy. Despite the absence of a formal knowledge base, similarities can be drawn with the psychological literature on parenting. For example, these categories of social work expectations could be viewed as aspects of a 'parenting task', in that these are behaviours that social workers expect parents to carry out. This would be a very similar notion to that within the parenting literature, of a task and relationship, which facilitates child development within the context of a safe environment. Table 1 demonstrates the similarities through comparing social work expectations of the abuse model with a diagram of the parenting task derived from the literature.

The categories found and developed from the data similarly stress the development of the child, but the issue of a 'safe environment' is given more emphasis in

Table 1 Comparison of social work expectations of parenting with the parenting task derived from the literature

Parenting task derived from the literature	Social work expectations of parenting
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● providing a safe environment ● being responsive and sensitive ● demonstrating disciplinary control ● responding to distress ● quality and affective tone of communication ● produce adaptations that develop the child's competencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● to 'prevent harm' ● to provide routinized and consistent physical care ● to know and be able to meet appropriate development levels ● to be emotionally available and sensitive

Source: Stratton and Hanks (1995); Melhuish (1998); Phoenix *et al.* (1991); Reder and Lucey (1995); Quinton and Rutter (1988)

terms of 'preventing abuse' and, as discussed earlier, is a more transcending concept. Furthermore, the social work categories appear to place more emphasis upon parents taking 'responsibility' for carrying out prescribed behaviour. Howitt (1992) similarly suggests that social workers assess parental behaviour against expected behaviour, using 'social templates', for example that of 'reasonable parenting'. He argues that this is a significant element of social work reasoning which can result in 'error making' in child-care decisions. Parton *et al.* (1997) also suggest that social workers use common-sense reasoning devices to make decisions, usually in situations of uncertainty, such as assessing whether a child is at risk of harm. This would involve clarifying the expected features of parenting in a situation and using the presence or absence of those features to judge the possibility of abuse occurring. This throws light, therefore, on why the social work conceptualization of parenting emerged as a series of expectations of behaviour and why there was some consensus about those expectations. In effect, the processes of practical reasoning were being made explicit.

However, one feature of the findings was that social workers appeared to adopt what we could term a 'surface-static' notion of parenting. This had a number of elements.

- Their surface response meant that they did not deal with psychological factors underlying the parenting problems (even where they had identified such factors).
- They tended also to rely on exhortation to change, rather than responses informed by psychological observations.
- Thirdly, this was often associated, when change did not occur, with perceptions by the social worker, of parent 'resistance'.

Where these occurred, the parent is presented as unresponsive and 'locked in' to their behaviours. Personality appears to be seen as a 'trait', one that is set and unchanging over time. Problems are seen by social workers to be deeply ingrained, they seem at a loss to know how to deal with this, and they respond by seeking to 'get the person to change'. It is a 'static' notion because by locating parental behaviour in personality the social workers essentially miss its fluidity. It can be seen that the static notion of parenting is at odds with the psychological parenting literature where current positions hold that parenting is both (i) a relationship and a task that

fluctuates and (ii) is determined by other psychosocial factors and relationships. Parenting is a more fluid process: over time, sometimes parenting may have been better, and sometimes it may have been worse. For example, Quinton and Rutter (1988) have noted how an improvement in a couple's relationship will create greater emotional resources for the parenting task. Social workers render themselves powerless by providing little idea of what psychosocial action could be taken. It is obviously not enough to centre intervention on making parents 'change' and accept their responsibilities.

One reason why the social workers were unable to break free from their 'surface-static model' was that their gaze was primarily directed to their legal responsibilities to ensure the protection of the child from harm, rather than on problems that beset parenting. Social workers were aware of the difficulties and struggles for parents of material deprivation, poor couple relationships and social isolation—many of the factors of the multiply determined parenting model from the psychological literature (Belsky, 1984; Reder and Lucey, 1995; Quinton and Rutter, 1988; Jenner and McCarthy, 1995). Yet these often remained unresolved as individual attributes, rather than making links between these disabling factors and a parenting style and the potential for harm.

The 'surface-static notion of parenting' may serve to make more difficult a rapprochement between family support and child protection. Alternatively, it may be that a full appreciation of the possibilities of family support requires an extension to include an understanding of those psychological mechanisms which may mediate between the provision of services and parental change. This may reflect processes identified in other research. Tunstall and Aldgate (2000) had to increase the number of local authorities providing their study sites because of the limited number of cases available that did not involve child protection, or children with special needs or disability. Yet the current 'refocusing' agenda for child-care practice is that 'safeguarding children should not be seen as a separate activity from promoting their welfare . . . they are two sides of the same coin' (Department of Health, 1999*a*). As Lynch and Browne (1996) put it 'child protection is enhanced by the improvements in the welfare of families and the promotion of positive parenting and child care'.

The findings suggest that this 'refocused' view of parenting will require an attitudinal shift to the construction of child and familial problems on the part of social workers. The overriding message emanating from this study was the extent to which the concepts of 'abuse', 'risk' and 'harm' pervade the conduct of practice and extend to the assessments of parenting. The requirement that social workers should seek to identify and remedy the problems that beset parenting involves not just a wider but also an altered focus. The assessment of parenting will not simply involve appraising the development of the child to assess how well the parenting task is carried out, but also the ways other determining factors of the ecological parenting model influence the parental capacity to carry out that task. Sometimes the parenting will be worse, sometimes it will be better. As the Framework for Assessing Children in Need and their Families (Department of Health, 1999) notes, the emphasis will be on 'judgement', and to facilitate this social workers will need to have an understanding of how the different factors fit within a framework, rather than existing as indi-

vidual attributes of 'vulnerability'. It is this 'careful analysis' of interacting factors that is considered to provide an insight as to the effects upon children in families.

It may be that the new post-qualifying award in childcare will contribute to the development of an emphasis on 'enhancing parental capacity' alongside that of 'assessing the safety of the child'. Nevertheless this exploratory study suggests that much needs to be done, and change in parenting assessments arising from post-qualifying education will require demonstration. This would also involve considering whether services, offered in the name of family support, reinforce a static notion of parenting, such as focusing solely on 'assessment' and the 'parental behaviour', or do actively seek to enhance parental capacity through improvements in the problems that beset the parent.

An immediate response to the findings might be to 'work more with parents'. Clearly, attention needs to be given to how this might occur, not least because the data demonstrate that working with parents is not easy. The wider focus for working with and supporting parents may require more skills than social workers currently use, or have 'permission' to use.

If, as the literature tells us, parenting is multiply determined, then an improvement in parenting will require a multiple range of solutions. It may be the case that if social workers can at least focus on these other issues that parents will begin to 'hear' the intentions of the social workers and to find the interventions helpful.

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