

The Shape of the Sculptor: Exploring Psychologist's Perceptions of a Model of Parenting Ability to Guide Intervention in Child Custody Evaluations in South Africa

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Abstract : This research project provides an interpretative phenomenological analysis of a proposed conceptual model of parenting ability that has been designed to offer recommendations to guide intervention in child custody evaluations in South Africa. A recent review of the literature on child custody evaluations reveals that while there have been significant and valuable shifts in the capacity of the legal system aided by mental health professionals in understanding children and family dynamics, there remains a conceptual gap regarding the nature of parenting ability. With a view to addressing this paucity of a theoretical basis for considering parenting ability, this research project reviews a dimensional model for the assessment of parenting ability by conceiving parenting ability as a combination of good parenting and parental fitness. This model serves as a conceptual framework to guide child-custody evaluation and refine intervention in such cases to better meet the best interests of the child in a manner that bridges the professional gap between parties, legal entities, and mental health professionals. Using a model of good parenting as a point of theoretical departure, this model incorporates both intra-psychic and interpersonal attributes and behaviours of parents to form an impression of parenting ability and identify areas for potential enhancement. This research, therefore, hopes to achieve the following: (1) to provide nuanced descriptions of parents' parenting ability; (2) to describe parents' parenting potential; (3) to provide a parenting assessment tool for investigators in forensic family matters that will enable more useful recommendations and interventions; (4) to develop a language of consensus for investigators, attorneys, judges and parents, in forensic family matters, as to what comprises parenting ability and how this can be assessed; and (5) that all of the aforementioned will serve to advance the best interests of the children involved in such litigious matters. The evaluative promise and post-assessment prospects of this model are illustrated through three interlinking data sets: (1) the results of interviews with South African psychologists about the model, (2) retrospective analysis of care and contact evaluation reports using the model to determine if different conclusions or more specific recommendations are generated with its use and (3) the results of an interview with a psychologist who piloted this model by using it in care and contact evaluation.

Keywords : alienation, attachment, best interests of the child, care and contact evaluation, children's act (38 of 2005), child custody evaluation, civil forensics, gatekeeping, good parenting, good-enough parenting, health professions council of South Africa, family law, forensic mental healthcare practitioners, parental fitness, parenting ability, parent management training, parenting plan, problem-determined system, psychotherapy, support of other child-parent relationship, voice of the child

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