

# Reflective Inquiry on Professionals' Views on Parents and About Parenting

Ching Man Lam\*

Department of Social Work, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

**Abstract:** Although there are studies on attitudes and beliefs of parents in childrearing, there is a notable lack of studies on professionals' attitudes and beliefs about parents and about parenting. This study examines both professionals' views of parents and their attitudes and beliefs about parenting, and compares these attitudes and beliefs among different types of professionals. The results indicate that professionals involved in parent education hold a moderately negative view of parents despite being quite sympathetic to the stress experienced by parents. Findings also reveal an undue concern with parenting knowledge and skills. Differences between teachers and social workers were found in perceived stress of parents and perceived role of government. These findings provide an impetus to professionals, and to society at large, to reflect on the values and attitudes they have towards parents and the family.

**Keywords:** Reflection, parenting, parental beliefs, parent education, professional views.

## INTRODUCTION

"The family" has long been perceived as a foundation to children's and society's success, and parenting has always been identified as the locus of intervention for solving children and family problems. This central notion of familial and parental responsibility has important consequences for policy formulation and service provision. In order to tackle various social and family problems, governments often establish programs to support families. In Hong Kong, parent education became a government-financed undertaking in 1979, when the Social Welfare Department began funding a new family-life education program. In the early 1990s, the Education Commission Reports [1] first suggested home-school collaboration and parent education. Since then, social workers and educators have promoted parent and family education as the key to effective parenting; they have taken on parent education as a major social intervention to tackle family problems. Government-financed interventions, often through professionals in human services and education, offer help to parents; this sort of family and parent education has come to be seen as a justifiable means to regulate parenthood. Over time, parents and professionals in Hong Kong have become receptive towards the idea of "learning to become better parents", as education services are provided increasingly to families and parents by social workers, health and child-care workers, and schoolteachers.

Throughout these 30 years of implementation, parent and family education has become a popular approach adopted to help parents, a "professional endeavor to assist parents in accomplishing specific goals or outcomes with their children" [2, p.131], and the principal paradigm in parenting

and family work. With a favor towards expert knowledge, and a belief that helping professionals know better, parents willingly absorb opinions and lessons given by the experts [3]. The knowledge claim of professionals gives them a mandate to regulate parenthood and to justify their domination [4, 5]. In recent decades, scholars and parenting work practitioners have begun to rethink many assumptions they had previously taken for granted, calling for a renewed focus on parent education [2, 6-8]. Parenting is being recognized as more than a skill or technical exercise; as such, parents' selfhood [8, 9] and their beliefs [10, 11] have begun to capture the attention of helping professionals in parenting work.

Selfhood is never an isolated entity. Others' perceptions, especially those of helping professionals, undoubtedly have an impact on parents. The literature reveals a notable lack of study on the perceptions, attitudes and beliefs of professionals who provide services to parents. The existing empirical studies on attitudes and beliefs are either on class and parental beliefs [12, 13], or on cross-cultural comparisons of parental goals [14-16]. Most of the studies have narrowly focused on effects of specific parental beliefs on child development, e.g., parental beliefs about punishment [17, 18] or child anxiety [19], or the parental child-management beliefs [20] to a particular child outcome [21], or a specific aspect of child behavior [22]. As for the small amount of research on professionals' views of parents, a majority has focused on families of children with disabilities [23, 24]. Little is known about how professionals who work closely with families perceive parents and parenting.

For parenting professionals, *values* serve as the frame of reference to generate both assumptions about parenting and expectations of parental roles. According to Kluckhohn, "a value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable which

\*Address correspondence to this author at the Department of Social Work, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T. Hong Kong; Tel: (852)-3943-7511; Fax: (852)-2603-5018; E-mail: [chingmanlam@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:chingmanlam@cuhk.edu.hk)

influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action" [25, p.395]. The definition accurately recognizes that, although beliefs and values are impalpable and intangible, they are of high importance. Beliefs and values serve as the "destiny", criteria for preferences [12] and are the framework through which we give meaning to particular behaviors. They have been conceived as a "standard of desirability", served as "criteria for selection in action" [26, p.283], and are normative standards that are brought to bear on policies for families and children. In Williams' view, when values and beliefs are most explicit and fully conceptualized, they become "criteria for judgment, preference, and choice"; when implicit and unreflected upon, they "nevertheless perform *as if* they constituted grounds for decisions in behavior" [26, p.283].

This paper examines the attitudes and beliefs of parenting work professionals in Hong Kong, and the values underpinning their practice. Notions of parenting are the product of social, historical and political contexts [27, 28], and even the terms "parent", "family", "children" and "parenthood" are value-charged. As a group working with parents in the local Hong Kong context, these professionals may share certain values and assumptions about parenting and parenthood. Their values and belief system relative to parents, as the general and durable internal criteria for evaluation [29], somehow determine their choices of theories for practice, themes to advocate, and parental characteristics to popularize, and inevitably these choices become the governing discourses on parenting. The aim of this study is to understand and examine professionals' views of parents and parenting to gauge their underlying values and beliefs. With a better understanding of these perceptions and beliefs, we might be able to understand the values underpinning our current family and parenting work.

## STUDY METHOD

This paper is drawn from an exploratory-descriptive study that examined the views and attitudes of professionals to raise consciousness and awareness about parenting. The participants in the study were professionals who work with parents, and the targets of the study were schools and social service agencies. A total of 764 survey questionnaires were sent to kindergartens, primary and secondary schools in four districts in Hong Kong, and to all of the social service agency units providing services for parents and families in Hong Kong. Respondents to this structured questionnaire were divided into two groups – teachers responsible for parent work in schools, and social workers in government or non-government social service agencies who provided parent-education services in the community.

The first part of the structured questionnaire sought information about the organization's characteristics, the nature and types of parent programs/services provided, and the perceived needs of parents. The second part of the questionnaire used a five-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, 2 – disagree, 3 – no opinion, 4 – agree and 5 – strongly agree) to measure five aspects of service providers' attitudes and beliefs. The questionnaire did include both positive and negative items, but negative items were recoded when computerizing the results so that lower scores on each scale

indicated respondents' negative beliefs. Items were developed after a thorough review of previous research on parenting. The following (including Table 1) is a summary of the scales, factor loadings and reliability.

1. Perception of Parents (PP) involves 8 items measuring the professionals' perceptions of parents regarding their readiness and adequacy to become parents. Results of factor analysis suggested two factors accounted for a total of 74.5% of the factor loading (reliability coefficient 0.878). The first factor was being equipped with knowledge and skills (4 items, factor loading 54.8%, reliability coefficient 0.916). The second was readiness to become parents (4 items, 19.7%, reliability coefficient 0.846).
2. Perceived Performance of Parenting Role (PPPR) involves 4 items measuring how the professionals perceived the parents' performance in their parenting role. Results of factor analysis suggested one factor accounted for 54.2% of the factor loading. The reliability of the scale was 0.711.
3. Perceived Stress of Parents (PSP) involves 4 items. Results of factor analysis suggested one factor accounted for 50.8% of the factor loading. The reliability of the scale was 0.672.
4. Perceived Role of Government (PRG) involves 7 items. Results of factor analysis suggested one factor accounted for 42.93% of the factor loading. The reliability of the scale was 0.722.
5. Perception of Parent Responsibility (PPR) involves 5 items. Results of factor analysis suggested one factor accounted for 48.27% of the factor loading. The reliability of the scale was 0.708.

## RESULTS

A total of 315 questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 43.2% (N=118) for schools and 40.1 % (N=197) for social service agencies. The study results revealed that professionals had a moderate negative attitude to parents. The mean score of the subscale Perception of Parents (PRP) was 2.7 whereas the mean score of the Perceived Performance of Parenting Role (PPPR) was 2.25. In other words, research participants perceived that parents were not well-equipped with knowledge and skills for parenting, and that these parents' performance of their parenting role was unsatisfactory. A majority of the social workers and teachers see parents as incapable of taking up their role, due to deficiencies in knowledge and skills. They perceived that a majority of the parents lacked knowledge and skills of parenting (mean = 2.22), knowledge on children's growth and development (mean = 2.29), knowledge and skills of communication (mean = 2.21), and knowledge on children's needs (mean = 2.27). Moreover, they also believed that these parents were failing to provide good role models and that there were discrepancies between their thinking and behavior in parenting (mean score = 2.38 and 2.33). These parents, according to the professionals, are overly concerned about their children's academic performance and thus ignore moral/value training for their children (mean = 2.05 and 2.26).

**Table 1. Factor loading and reliability of scales and sub-scales.**

Name of Scale and Subscales	No. of Items	Loading	% of Variance	Alpha Reliability
Perception of parents	8			0.878
• Equipped with knowledge and skills	4			
Item 8a		0.926	54.8	0.916
Item 8c		0.856		
Item 8b		0.839		
Item 8d		0.789		
• Readiness to become parents	4			
Item 8f		0.893	19.7	0.846
Item 8g		0.830		
Item 8h		0.672		
Item 8e		0.654		
Perceived performance of parenting role	4		54.2	0.711
Item 8n		0.436		
Item 8o		0.679		
Item 8w		0.696		
Item 8x		0.678		
Perceived stress of parents	4		50.8	0.672
Item 8k		0.728		
Item 8i		0.687		
Item 8j		0.525		
Item 8l		0.404		
Perceived role of government	7		42.93	0.772
Item 7h		0.679		
Item 7e		0.671		
Item 7b		0.600		
Item 7g		0.572		
Item 7d		0.545		
Item 7a		0.542		
Item 7c		0.419		
Perception of parent responsibility	5		48.27	0.708
Item 8z		0.772		
Item 8aa		0.608		
Item 8y		0.607		
Item 8ac		0.503		
Item 8ab		0.474		

In general, participants were quite sympathetic to the stress experienced by parents (mean = 3.84). They are aware that social demands (mean = 3.17), academic learnings (mean = 3.96) and the education system (mean = 3.99) put stress on parents, and they agree that it is stressful to be a parent nowadays (mean = 4.25). Table 2 presents the findings.

The professionals in this study generally shared the view – 94.21% concurred (82.31% agreed and 11.9% strongly agreed) – that the education and development of the younger generation should not be the parents' responsibility alone, and 34.82% agreed that the government had a responsibility to provide resources, opportunities and assistance to parents and families. The professionals also said they understood the stress parents face in parenting and in dealing with various problems in work and life; 81.73% of professionals believed (63.78% agreed and 17.95% strongly agreed) that parents

were stressed. On the other hand, professionals' attitudes towards parents and their parenting were particularly negative in the aspects of capability and performance. Regarding capability, 74.36% of the respondents disagreed (6.09% strongly disagreed and 68.27% disagreed) that parents were capable of taking up the role of parenthood and were equipped with knowledge and skills related to parenting, development/needs of children, and communication. They were also not satisfied with parents' performance of their parenting role, their dedication to children, their focus on children's academic success, and their moral values and ethics. Only 5.48% of the professionals agreed that parents could adequately perform their role, while 60% disagreed (6.77% strongly disagree and 53.23% disagree). Table 3 shows the detailed results.

Correlations between scales were also examined. Results indicated significant positive correlations of three areas –

**Table 2. Professional attitudes towards parenting (recoded).**

Content of the Item	Mean Score
<b>Sub-Scale on Perception of Parents</b>	<b>2.7</b>
Parents lack knowledge and skills of parenting	2.22
Parents lack knowledge on children's growth and development	2.29
Parents lack knowledge and skills of communication	2.21
Parents lack knowledge on children's needs	2.27
Parents are irresponsible	3.15
Parents are immature	3.15
Parents are not ready to be parents	3.04
Parents are unsuited to being parents	3.35
<b>Perceived performance of parenting role</b>	<b>2.25</b>
I feel that most parents are overly concerned about academic achievement	2.05
Parents are overly concerned about their children's academic training and ignore moral/value training	2.26
Parents have discrepancies in their parenting thought and behavior	2.33
Parents are failing to provide good role models	2.38
<b>Subscale on perceived stress of parents</b>	<b>3.84</b>
Academic learnings put stress on parents	3.96
Social demands put stress on parents	3.17
Education system puts stress on parents	3.99
It is stressful being a parent nowadays	4.25

**Table 3. Percentage of responses to the items scale (Negative responses have been recoded).**

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Perception of parents' capability	6.09% (19)	68.27% (213)	14.10% (44)	10.90% (34)	0.64% (2)
Perception of parents' readiness	2.56% (8)	13.78% (43)	38.14% (119)	42.96% (134)	2.56% (8)
Perceived performance of parenting role	6.77 % (21)	53.23% (165)	34.52% (107)	5.48% (17)	
Perceived stress of parents		1.28% (4)	16.99% (53)	63.78% (199)	17.95% (56)
Perceived role of government		3.51% (11)	61.67% (193)	34.82 % (109)	
Perception of parent responsibility			5.79% (18)	82.31% (256)	11.90% (37)

perceived parental capabilities, perceived readiness to become parents, perceived performance of parenting role – with understanding of parents' stress. On the other hand, these items were negatively correlated with perceived role of government and perception of parental responsibility. Perhaps professionals with a positive view of parents tend to perceive parents both as having better knowledge and skills of parenting and as being more ready and prepared to become parents. They were also more empathetic to parents' stress in parenting and were more likely to believe that parenting is not the responsibility of parents alone, i.e., that government has a role to play in supporting parents. Table 4 shows detailed results.

Independent T tests were performed to compare teachers and social workers, but no difference was found between the two groups in their perceptions of parents' performance of their parenting role; both groups tended to regard parents as inadequate in performing their parenting role, with an identical mean score (Mean = 2.26). With regard to their perceptions of parents, the social worker group was slightly more positive than the teacher group with regard to

perceptions of parents' capability, performance and responsibility, but the difference was insignificant ( $P > .05$ ). Compared with teachers, social workers were considerably more sympathetic to the stress experienced by parents ( $t = 7.18, p = 0.000$ ), more likely to see the role of government in supporting parents ( $t = 4.14, p = 0.000$ ), more positive in general about parents ( $t = 2.08, p = 0.038$ ), and more likely to say that parents were ready to become parents ( $t = 2.52, p = 0.012$ ). Table 5 shows detailed results.

### DISCUSSION

A vital point worth noting is that a significant number of professionals in this study held a quite negative view of parents and their parenting practice. About three-fourths (74.36%) did not see parents as capable, and more than half (60%) disagreed that parents could adequately perform their parental role. This finding, consonant with those of other studies, reveals the popularity of parent-blaming among professionals. In Campbell and Halbert's study [30], practitioners assigned both issues and solutions to parents.

**Table 4. Correlations between scales.**

	Parent Capability	Readiness to Become Parent	Performance of Parents	Stress of Parent	Role of Government	Parental Responsibility
Parent capability	-	0.470***	0.361***	-0.169**	-0.246**	-0.112*
Readiness to become parent	-	-	0.456***	-0.066	-0.096	-0.039
Performance of parents	-	-	-	-0.198***	-0.209***	-0.143*
Stress of parent	-	-	-	-	0.489***	0.393***
Role of government	-	-	-	-	-	0.448***
Parental responsibility	-	-	-	-	-	-

\*\*\* p<.001 \*\* p<.01 \* p<.05.

**Table 5. Independent T test between social workers and teachers.**

	Social Workers		Teachers		T- Value	Sig (2-Tailed)
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Perception of parents	2.81	0.65	2.65	0.67	2.08	0.038*
Capability	2.3	0.79	2.22	0.72	0.91	0.366
Readiness	3.32	0.75	3.08	0.83	2.52	0.012*
Perceived performance of parenting role	2.26	0.64	2.26	0.60	0.63	0.950
Perceived stress on parents	4.13	0.50	3.67	0.58	7.18	0.000***
Perceived role of government	3.48	0.41	3.27	0.44	4.14	0.000***
Perception of parent responsibility	4.04	0.36	3.99	0.39	1.14	0.254

\*\*\* p<.0001 \*\* p<.01 \* p<.05.

Bezdek, Summers and Turnbull’s study [23] revealed that professionals were both unable to see things from the families’ points of view and likely to see the problem as with the family. Another study [24] reported parents’ allegations that professionals often attribute children’s problems to parental deficits. This view of professionals, and the emphasis given to parental obligation in child rearing, reflects the traditional nurture assumption [31, 32] that “what influences children’s development, apart from genes, is the way their parents bring them up” [33, p.2]. Accepting this assumption, professionals reinforce the mounting social expectation that parents be held accountable for the development of their children; therefore parents are expected to possess parenting knowledge and skills in order to become “good-enough” parents. Yet for many peoples “good-enough” requires “perfect attunement” [34], which leads inevitably to parent-blaming. As Harris commented, “the standards set by the promulgators of the nurture assumption are so high that no one can meet them” [33, p.352]. Tomalin also remarked that parenting has become an object of professional surveillance: “parental failure has been so thoroughly investigated that almost everyone is ready to plead guilty” [35, p.vii]. For many parents, blaming is a burden that complicates their already complex responsibilities. Under the blaming frame, parents carry the burden of societal and professional disapproval, resulting in feelings of shame, guilt and powerlessness. This study’s findings on the theme of parent blaming provide an impetus for professionals to reflect on the attitudes and assumptions they hold towards parents and parenting. As professionals

who work closely with parents, we should critically examine how our accounts of parenting “are constructed to warrant particular claims and to undermine others” [36, p.34]; we must “think about what we are doing” [37, p.22] and its impact on parents, and we must consider to what extent our views contribute to the perpetuation of parent blaming. It is essential for professionals to share the view that parenting is locally and socially situated, with no encoded set of knowledge and skills as the standard. Also, it is vital to accept the reality that human perfection does not exist. Then, professionals will no longer need to see themselves as the standard-bearers of good parenting; our interactions with parents will naturally be less blaming and more respectful and empowering.

The findings of this study reveal that professionals are particularly unsatisfied with parents’ performance. They perceive parents as incapable, and they attribute this to deficiencies in knowledge and skills. Professionals’ distress regarding the competence of parent parallel the underlying themes in the Western conception of parenting with a foremost idea that parental functioning is somehow related to children’s functioning [31] and that it is essential for parents to have knowledge and skills to fulfill their roles [38]. The findings of this study authenticate the prominence of the knowledge-and-skills inclination in parenting. They highlight professionals’ view of the importance of teaching parents more functional child-rearing strategies. Review on parenting literature uncovers that skills and techniques premised on instrumental rationality have long been stressed under the influence of scientism and competence-based

practice [9] and this undue concern with knowledge and skills in parenting has been reflected in the popular Western parent education programs [39, 40]. The knowledge-skill focused training of this "education model" has long been employed in parenting work [7] despite being criticized for being potentially dehumanizing [41], as well as narrow and outdated [42, 43]. Local scholars [7-9] have reminded us that parenting is not a technocratic or technical practices; it is about the personhood and "whole-person development" of parents. Along these lines, professionals must go deeper than surface level of knowledge and skills to work with the parents as individuals, to develop the parents' "personhood", and to develop collaborative practice in working with parents [44].

The present study's findings add strong support to the view that the government has an important role to play in helping families. Almost all the respondents (94.21%) agreed that nurturing the young is not the parents' responsibility alone. They generally agreed that there is a public, governmental responsibility to build communities that support families. This reveals that professionals, on one hand, value the family as a fundamental unit that should take responsibility for raising children, and on the other hand recognize the significance of the government's role. Although it is easier to blame individual parents for causing harm to their children, professionals should also consider structural barriers and acknowledge that the development of children can be significantly strengthened or weakened depending on the role of society and government.

Although there was no difference between teachers and social workers in their perceptions of parents' performance, social workers were significantly more sympathetic to the stress experienced by parents and more inclined to view government as having a significant role to play in supporting families. The Chinese cultural beliefs on parenting and the Chinese tradition of family education for the young [45] might have a role in the teachers' negative perception. For example, the traditional Confucian teaching of "parents to teach by example" is likely to result in high expectation on parents. The popular Chinese saying of "when children are not educated, it is the parents' fault, while if children are not educated well, it is due to the teachers' laziness" might have pressure on teachers and influenced their perception of parents and their parenting.

As today's Hong Kong parents face difficulties arising from variety of external forces – poverty, competitive education system, erratic economic and political forces – all impinging on the ecology of parenting. The implications of the findings extend to professional education, with teacher-training curricula needing to integrate social and cultural factors into an ecosystems understanding. Embedding parenting in a context, seeing parenting as social and structural, and recognizing the difficulties and challenges faced by families – all these practices reflect the values of acceptance, understanding and respect.

Beliefs and attitudes are important in the development of behavior – they contribute to understanding and as a means through which behavior is guided – and it is a matter of fact that professionals in Hong Kong rarely have the opportunity to explore their views, values and attitudes about parents. This study suggests that professionals do have attitudes

about parenting and parenthood. The significance of "reflection" in parenting work has always been underestimated. This paper calls practitioners to reflect on their assumptions in order to develop critical thinking and self-awareness, as well as to become more reflective family practitioners.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author confirms that this article content has no conflict of interest.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Declared none.

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Received: October 23, 2014

Revised: November 7, 2014

Accepted: January 19, 2015

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