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## Article

# Ambivalence in Child Protection Proceedings: Parents' Views on Their Interactions with Child Protection Authorities

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**Abstract:** Child protection is a field characterized by intrinsic tensions and ambivalence, related to the state's intervention in the family sphere and to a double mandate of care and control. This article focuses on the participation of parents in statutory child protection proceedings and the ambivalence they experience in their interactions with the Child and Adult Protection Authority in Switzerland (CAPA). The aim is to explore parents' views on what they consider as hindering or enabling in their interactions with the CAPA in order to be able to fully participate in child protection proceedings. The article is based on a large interdisciplinary research project including multi-perspective cases collected in four cantons of Switzerland and puts the focus on in-depth interviews with ten birth parents. Results show that ambivalence is inherent to the interactions between parents and the CAPA, as the mere opening of child protection proceedings is experienced as a threat to the parents' integrity. Establishing trust, recognizing parents' expertise and acknowledging their needs are key to re-establishing parental integrity, which seems to be a fundamental pre-requisite for reducing ambivalence and enhancing participation in child protection proceedings.



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**Keywords:** child protection; parents; ambivalence; recognition; participation; integrity

## 1. Introduction

The field of child protection has long considered child protection practices and policies as straightforward responses to child abuse and neglect, but has recently been moving away from this view, acknowledging that these practices and policies have their own dynamics and determinations (Parton 2022) that can produce intrinsic tensions and ambivalence at different levels. Such fundamental tensions occur because child protection authorities have a seemingly contradictory double mandate of *care and control* (Böhnisch and Löscher 1973; Featherstone et al. 2014; Mitchell 2022) or, in other words, of *care and intervention*. This means that authorities have the duty to intervene in families by using potentially coercive measures and restricting parental rights in order to protect children from abuse and neglect and ensure their wellbeing. Many studies indicate that involving families in child protection proceedings gives rise to ambivalent yet differentiated experiences and emotions on the part of both parents and children. Child protection interventions can lead to the experience of negative feelings such as fear, shame, stigma, powerlessness, disrespect, anger, as well as positive feelings (Bekaert et al. 2021; Cossar et al. 2016; Dale 2004; Dillon et al. 2016; Dumbrill 2006; Featherstone et al. 2014; Gibson 2019; Petersen 2018; Wolff et al. 2016; Quick and Scott 2019). Positive feelings such as trust, dialogue, support and respect are highly important relational aspects to enhance positive experiences, as the available body of literature indicates (Arbeiter and Toros 2017; Bekaert et al. 2021; Dumbrill 2006; Featherstone et al. 2014; Gallagher et al. 2012; Husby et al. 2018; Höjer 2011; Rüegger et al. 2021). It has been shown that positive experiences help to engage parents, which is fundamental to obtaining positive outcomes of child protection interventions (Gibson 2019;

[Arbeiter and Toros 2017](#)). Furthermore, ambivalent feelings of parents are understandable as state intervention in the private family sphere happens within the context of preexisting family difficulties and can have an unknown major biographical and long-lasting impact on the lives of individual family members.

In this complex context, the child protection authorities have to guarantee the right to participate of the persons concerned, both parents and children. [Healy and Darlington \(2009, p. 420\)](#) problematize the notion of participation as ‘working with’ the client and, at the same time, the requirement for child protection practitioners to exercise power against their client’s wishes when needed. This illustrates that parents are in a less powerful (decisional) position than child protection professionals ([Featherstone et al. 2014](#)). This leads to conflict when understanding participation as a deliberative process ([Habermas 1981](#)) and when stating that legitimate decisions can only be made by deliberating with the persons concerned at eye level ([Willumsen and Skivenes 2005](#)). The structurally given *tension of participation in the context of potential coercion* is inherent to statutory child protection and highly challenging. [Healy and Darlington \(2009, pp. 421–22\)](#) found that tensions inherent to child protection cases are rooted in parents’ multiple roles and statuses such as “as carers, rights-bearing citizens and the subjects of child endangerment allegations”. As we will argue, the sociology of ambivalence picks up on the issue of roles and delivers insightful explanations for understanding ambivalence embedded in interactions in child protection proceedings. The concept of sociological ambivalence has been used by scholars in the field of family relations; in particular, when studying intergenerational relations and roles ([Aeby et al. 2021](#); [Connidis 2015](#); [Connidis and McMullin 2002](#); [Lüscher 2002](#); [Lüscher and Pillemer 1998](#); [Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011](#); [Rappoport and Lowenstein 2007](#); [Willson et al. 2003](#)) but it has not been applied to the field of child protection (with the notable exception of a recent study on foster care by [Järvinen and Luckow \(2020\)](#)). Although scholars have pointed out organizational ambivalence and tensions occurring in the field of child protection, they have mainly referred to concepts from [Lipsky’s \(1980\)](#) theory of street-level bureaucracy to explain them ([Koch et al. 2019](#)). Useful as this is, particular in order to understand professionals’ views, the concept of ambivalence provides a complementary and necessary perspective when considering actual interactions between actors (parents) and their embeddedness in a wider social context (rooted in Norbert Elias’ figuration theory (1983); see also [Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011](#)).

This article puts the focus on parents and their perspective, as little is known on how they experience their actual interactions with the Swiss child protection authorities ([Biesel et al. 2017](#); [Schoch et al. 2020](#)). We first briefly describe the Swiss context and then discuss the concept of ambivalence and its applicability in the field of child protection. After specifying our methodological approach, we present the results of our qualitative data analysis and explore the ambivalent feelings of parents involved in statutory child protection proceedings, and their strategies to interact with the authorities. Lastly, we discuss which interactions parents consider to be enabling or to hinder their participation in the proceedings.

### 1.1. The Swiss Child Protection Context

In Switzerland, the Child and Adult Protection Authority (CAPA) is a court-like decision-making body in cases of child endangerment reports filed in cases of suspected child abuse or neglect. The CAPA is responsible for conducting child protection proceedings, which involves assessing the child’s wellbeing (or mandating a social service to do so), meeting the individuals concerned in the context of formal hearings and taking statutory child protection decisions under federal Swiss civil law ([Schnurr 2017](#); [Schoch et al. 2020](#)). According to the Swiss system of federalism, the organization of the CAPA as well as all other supportive child protection services are under the jurisdiction of the cantons. Thus, the Swiss child protection system rather resembles a patchwork of 26 cantonal regimes ([Jud and Knüsel 2019](#); [Schnurr 2017](#)). In general, during child protection proceedings, the CAPA follows the principle of no-fault liability by focusing on the child’s wellbeing. When choos-

ing a child protection measure, the CAPA must consider the principles of proportionality (as little intervention as possible but as much as needed to ensure the child's wellbeing), complementarity (complementing parents' actions, not taking over responsibilities that they are able to fulfil) and subsidiarity (taking over duties not carried out by the parents to ensure the child's wellbeing) (Fassbind 2016; Schnurr 2017).

It is, however, crucial to mention that according to the Swiss Civil Code, the Child and Adult Protection Authority is only authorized to order child protection measures, and hence to intervene in the family, if parents are unable or unwilling to resolve identified situations of child endangerment. Separately from statutory child protection, social agencies such as general social services or children's services offer counseling and/or mediate access to non-statutory support services for families and children. This is often referred to as the "voluntary" part of the child protection system in Switzerland. These services (as well as, for instance, schools or any individual) can file an endangerment report if the child's wellbeing seems at risk (Rosch and Hauri 2016). Thus, the "voluntary" involvement of a family with supporting services can switch to (involuntary) statutory child protection proceedings led by the CAPA. To parents, the boundaries between these two types of child protection services often seem rather blurry (Koch et al. 2019; Koch and Schoch 2022; Schnurr 2017).

### 1.2. Ambivalence and Tensions in Child Protection Proceedings: Theoretical Background

Ambivalence can be defined as a lasting co-occurrence of positive and negative dimensions within the same relationship (Lüscher 2002). Connidis and McMullin (2002) conceptualized ambivalence as socially structured contradictions becoming manifest in interaction. Thus, the *sociology of ambivalence* concentrates on the ambivalence a person can experience in social interactions and not on the intrapersonal ambivalence a person may feel in a psychological sense. Sociological ambivalence arises from "incompatible normative expectations of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors assigned to a status" and further "refers to opposing normative tendencies in the social definition of a role" (Merton and Barber 1976, pp. 10, 12). Potentially conflicting norms and counter-norms are built into the social definition of a role and provide for the normatively acceptable range of behaviours to fulfil different functions (Merton and Barber 1976, pp. 17–19). For example, the role of a physician requires the "oscillation of behaviors: of [affective] detachment and compassion, of discipline and permissiveness, of personal and impersonal treatment" (Merton and Barber 1976, p. 8). Ambivalence is consequently inherent to each role and can be understood as "conflict in patterned situations and social structure" (Merton and Barber 1976, p. 19). Hence, the relationship between "professionals" and so called "clients"—such as a doctor and her/his client—should also be understood as structurally ambivalent (Merton and Barber 1976, p. 19).

There are also external, structural sources of ambivalence towards a role. Most important for the field of child protection is the social context of the client–professional interaction characterized by an imbalance in power in favor of the professionals—the members of the Child and Adult Protection Authority (CAPA) who hold decisional power and are equipped with specialized knowledge on the topic of child wellbeing. The clients here are parents who feel they are being perceived as failing in the eyes of the authority (Quick and Scott 2019, p. 486) and are suspected of having problems and a need for support. The relationship between parents and professionals is therefore characterized by basic anxiety on the part of the parents rooted in uncertainty regarding "how things really stand" and what the outcome will be (Merton and Barber 1976, p. 23). This applies very well to the context of child protection proceedings in which potential coercive measures can be decided upon if the professionals think these are needed to ensure or restore the child's wellbeing. Furthermore, parents might hope to be reassured and helped by the professional's "specialized knowledge" (Merton and Barber 1976, pp. 27–28). The aspect of the professional's authority or power can reinforce parent's anxiety because their specialized knowledge creates a dependence on the professional for the solving of their problem. A good example

would be the authority's specialized knowledge on the different measures and which forms of support offers exist in the region, which parents are unlikely to know. Some persons also feel ashamed about their inability to solve their problems by themselves and their need for professional help. Ambivalent feelings of parents are further fueled by the fact that they—unlike customers—usually cannot leave the client–professional relationship easily. Accordingly, in the case of statutory child protection proceedings where cooperation between parents and the authority is compulsory, and coercive child protection measures can be taken, ambivalent feelings can increase even more. Furthermore, the relationship is accompanied by the parent's fear of not living up to the professional's expectations regarding how to act. Parents can feel frustrated by or hostile towards professionals since they can require parents to abandon habits and practices or ask for the revealing of private information on potentially shameful actions. This can damage the parent's self-esteem. The professional's authority can therefore create ambivalent feelings in the parent, oscillating between respect, admiration, love and fear, hatred, and contempt (Merton and Barber 1976, pp. 19–28).

Questions of power are indeed crucial to understanding tensions and ambivalence arising from interactions. Even in a structurally weaker position, parents and children should be understood as active social actors, whose agency depends on varying enabling or restricting characteristics of social structures (Duncan 2019; Raithelhuber and Schröer 2018; Schoch et al. 2020). To quote Connidis and McMullin (2002, p. 558): “Ambivalence is a particularly useful concept when imbedded in a theoretical framework that views social structure as structured social relations, and individuals as actors who exercise agency as they negotiate relationships within the constraints of social structure”.

This relational aspect echoes Honneth's (1995) *recognition theory* with the three axes of recognition and can be applied to the relationship between professionals and parents in the context of child protection proceedings, as shown in a previous article (Schoch et al. 2020). (1) The axis of *love* is linked to experiences of love in close relationships such as among couples, family members or friends, which creates self-confidence. The experiences of violence would be a sign of lack of recognition on this axis and relates to interactions where individuals show a lack of genuine empathy and concern for someone's feelings. (2) Recognition on the axis of *rights* is realized if individuals have rights and are treated equally, which is a source of self-respect. If individuals are excluded from certain rights, this axis of recognition is disrespected. From this perspective, it means that rights have to be actively guaranteed to all concerned individuals during child protection proceedings. (3) Recognition on the axis of *solidarity* can be experienced if there is respect for other people's opinions, roles, status, attitudes, or skills. This enhances their self-esteem. The opposite of recognition in the form of solidarity is experienced in the form of shame, denigration, or loss of honour. This is linked to recognizing parents' different roles, expertise and diverging opinions, even if child protection measures might be needed. Experiences of disrespect on these axes of recognition can lead to social resistance, conflict, and the struggle for the recognition of individuals in a way that re-establishes lost dignity.

Recognition theory can be an inspiring approach to defining and establishing integrity in social interactions. *Integrity* can generally be defined as a state of physical and psychological soundness as well as the opportunity and ability to achieve self-set goals (Becker-Lenz and Müller-Hermann 2013, p. 212). Hence, if parents or children in child protection proceedings experience disrespect with regard to social recognition in one of the above-mentioned ways, e.g., psychological violence, no respect for their rights or roles or a feeling of shame, this can be seen as a violation of their integrity. Furthermore, not feeling listened to properly or a lack of empathy when formulating an opinion restricts an individual's ability to define or achieve self-set goals, and hence curtails their integrity. Consequently, we suggest linking the sociology of ambivalence, recognition theory and the concept of integrity to analyze the perspective of parents on their interactions with child protection authorities.



## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1. Data Collection and Sample

Our data stem from an interdisciplinary research project entitled “Integrity, autonomy and participation: How do children and parents experience the proceedings of Child and Adult Protection Authorities?”. The empirical study comprised three parts: a qualitative part with participant observations of hearings conducted by the CAPA in 2019 (1a), and case-based multi-perspective interviews in 2019 and 2020 (1b), an online quantitative survey in 2021 and 2022 (2), and focus groups in 2022 (3). For this article, we used data from part 1b (interviews) only. Our data collection method was based on the multi-perspective case work method, which is well known in social work (Müller 2017). It implies integrating all perspectives, namely, of parents, children and CAPA members to contextualize and connect subjective experiences. Experienced researchers with specialist training in working with traumatized populations (Gorin et al. 2008, p. 280) conducted the semi-structured interviews. Recruitment was carried out in partnership with two CAPAs located in the German-speaking region of Switzerland and two CAPAs located in the French-speaking region of Switzerland.

Data from ten cases were collected in the study, including at least the perspectives of a CAPA member and the perspective of a family member, either a parent or a child (1b). The two inclusion conditions were that a decision had already been made to avoid interfering with the decision-making process, and that the last decision (as there are often several decisions over time) had been made within the previous year to avoid memory bias and to allow participants to reflect on the whole process. However, this article is based on a subset of seven cases as three cases did not include the parents’ perspective (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Data sample summary.

Case	Parent Interviews	Other Interviews	Report by
C1	Father	CAPA member and deputy	Self-report and third party
C2	Mother	CAPA member and deputy, child	Self-report and third party
C3	Mother, father (separate interviews)	CAPA member and deputy	Third party
C4	Mother	CAPA member and deputy	Self-report
C5	Mother and father (joint interview)	CAPA member and deputy	Self-report
C6	Mother, father (separate interviews)	CAPA member, child	Self-report and third party
C7	Mother	CAPA member, child	Self-report

In two cases, parents were no longer involved in their child(ren)’s lives (a child with a deceased father and a mother abroad; a child abandoned with a relative who became the child’s foster family). In the third case, we were not able to organize an interview with the parents due to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. From these seven cases, we obtained a total of nine interviews with ten birth parents (six mothers, four fathers). The higher number of female participants reflects the focus on mothers in child protection (Brandon et al. 2019). We focused on families with child endangerment situations other than conflicts about visitation rights only. There are no cases of sexual abuse represented in the sample. The recruitment method via the CAPA has probably caused a selection bias toward easier cases. Indeed, it is likely that parents who were perceived as uncooperative or highly dissatisfied were less likely to be invited and less willing to participate in our study. The fact that the child endangerment report mainly stems from the parents themselves seems to support this selection bias hypothesis. Indeed, in all but one case, parents reported approaching the CAPA themselves to receive support in conflicting family situations, even when this was conducted in parallel with a report made by a third party (three cases). In only one case (C3) were parents reported by a third party only. Nevertheless, even in case of self-reporting, there is often a professional involved who is aware of the family situation

and who advises the parents to do so (e.g., a schoolteacher in C7). Hence, it is likely that not all parents were intrinsically motivated to reach out to the CAPA voluntarily, but rather motivated by the threat that third parties could do so in their stead (Koch and Schoch 2022). All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the exception of one interview where notes were taken instead, as the parent refused the recording.

## 2.2. Data Analysis Method for Interviews

The multi-perspective case study design used in this study is adapted from an approach to the analysis of serious or fatal child protection cases, known as the dialogical-systemic case laboratory (Biesel and Wolff 2013). We analyzed the interview data in a two-step process: an initial reconstructive approach based on the integrative procedure for the reconstructive analysis (Kruse et al. 2011) was applied to two full cases and all persons interviewed in the cases (children, parents, and CAPA members). In this first analytical step, we reconstructed the meaning of the specific case and identified recurring patterns and themes reported by parents. Based on this knowledge, the second analytical step consisted of conducting a thematically inspired analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) in all cases. Thematic analysis aims to identify themes or patterns in the data which are important in relation to the research question. As a framing strategy with a theoretically informed but open perspective (Braun and Clarke 2006), we focused on recurring patterns in interactions between parents and the CAPA members in which the interviewees reported on experiencing hindering or enabling participation during the child protection proceedings (an open deductive approach). With this analysis strategy, we were able to stay close to the data, detecting themes guided by their definition of “keyness” (Braun and Clarke 2006, p. 82).

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Ambivalence at the Root of the Proceedings: Experiencing the Threat to Parental Integrity

Most parents were not clear about whether their motivation to file an endangerment report was intrinsically motivated or if the motivation to do so was extrinsic due to the threat that other persons could do so instead. This hints at the first structural ambivalence of care and control in the field: once the CAPA receives a child endangerment report (either filed by a parent or/and a third party such as the school, a social service or a private person), parents are legally obliged to cooperate in the assessment and, if required, to accept child protection measures.

The CAPA intervention is first interpreted by the interviewed parents as an indication that the parents in general must have lost “control” (C2) of the situation or that something was “really wrong” (C5) within the family system. Some parents mention the difficulty of losing control and influence over the situation, and that they went through an internal process of acknowledging that they were not able to support their children sufficiently, admitting that they felt unable to solve their difficulties by themselves and that they needed support. In this escalating context, the CAPA was usually seen as a last resort solution, “the last chance” (C5) to avoid an out-of-home placement (for a voluntary request) or as a dead end (when being reported by a third party).

Although the parents themselves report that at certain times they were glad that the CAPA was involved, their contact was without exception accompanied by ambivalence, experiencing feelings oscillating between negative and positive at once. All parents report to varying degrees and at different stages—that they were also sceptical, distrustful or anxious of the CAPA. Furthermore, parents report not only having experienced support, but also strong negative feelings such as self-doubt, self-reproach, and/or shame about being dependent on external help. These topics often came up implicitly or in a negating formulation, as seen in the following citation:

*“It’s not about my damaged pride: Did I fail as a mother? Although two have turned out well and the third now just, uh, crosses the line a bit, uh, yes, if you can stand above that, then, I think, the contact with the CAPA is good.” (C4)*

One mother explicitly mentions the most painful experience during the child protection proceedings was that she felt she was perceived by the CAPA as a bad mother, as a threat to her own child (C3). Interestingly, all interviewed parents touch on the issue of potentially being suspected of being an uncaring, harmful or bad parent figure. Another mother explicitly describes the involvement of the CAPA as “humiliating” because as a mother you wish to have everything “under control” and you would like to do “things right” (C2). Some parents mentioned finding it exhausting or even humiliating to have to disclose private information such as their family difficulties repeatedly in front of different professionals during the proceedings and possibly also to professionals in voluntary services consulted before the proceedings.

Regardless of the context or the case specificity, all interviewed parents mention their parental role being questioned. This is perceived as hurtful or shameful, lowering parents’ self-esteem, and can be interpreted as a violation of parental integrity since—in terms of recognition theory—experiencing shame is seen as a lack of recognition. Furthermore, it indicates that parental integrity might be threatened per se by the mere opening of child protection proceedings.

It seems worth mentioning an important insight, even though it cannot be elaborated in depth. The threat to one’s integrity seems to be even more serious for mothers as they are often perceived as the “leading case worker” as a mother described it (C5). This is in line with previous research about the differentiated involvement of mothers and fathers in child protection (Brandon et al. 2019; Vogel Campanello et al. 2021; Aeby et al. 2021). It seems that by focusing on the mother as main addressee, fathers can be put into a marginalized position in the course of the proceedings.

Despite the experience of threatened parental integrity, and despite their scepticism at the start of the proceedings, most of the parents rate their experience with the CAPA overall as mainly positive. Other scholars report a much more negative overall evaluation of the proceeding (Petersen 2018), as our quantitative survey indicate too. The reason for the relatively positive overall evaluation in our qualitative sample could be due to the selection bias we explained in the materials and methods section. Indeed, parents retrospectively describe the actions and decisions of the CAPA as legitimate overall, given their family situation at that time, while also reporting on negative experiences such as distrust or disagreements with the professionals at certain stages or in certain situations during the proceedings. Hence, without any exception, parents reported experiencing ambivalent feelings during child protection proceedings and felt a lack of recognition in fulfilling their parental role adequately.

### 3.2. Ambivalence of the Parental Role: Parents’ Reactions to the Perceived Violation of Parental Integrity

#### Strategies of Differentiation and Narrative Shift

Parents seem to develop *strategies of differentiation* and *narrative shift* as a reaction to the fundamental threat to their parental integrity, or, in other words, the experienced lack of recognition in their parental role and the threatening stigma as potentially failing families.

Regarding the *differentiation strategy*, it consists of picturing worse family situations, mentioning that they do not belong to the category of the classical ‘problematic’ families who are usually involved with the CAPA, such as parents abusing drugs, neglecting the child’s supervision, hitting the child, not knowing or not wanting to know about the child’s delinquent behaviour or school absenteeism. By adopting this strategy, parents distance and distinguish themselves from others (othering) and downplay the severity of their own case. For instance, a mother explained that her case was not as “catastrophic” as others were, that her house was always “clean” and her children always had “food on the table” (C7). Differentiation strategies often include parents presenting themselves as competent parents. As an example, one father reports that they received a lot of understanding for their difficult situation from the CAPA but questions whether it would have been the same if they “had done something wrong” or if they had been “reluctant” to fulfil their



parental duties and therefore could have been blamed for the difficulties (C5). In one case (C1), the father mentions that the CAPA legitimized him as a good parent and judged the fulfilment of his parental role positively by telling him that he was “not a threat” to his children. Besides a differentiation strategy by means of which parents portray themselves as fulfilling their parental role well, some also explicitly rate their encounter with the CAPA as completely free from feelings of being judged negatively. Asked about advice to other parents in child protection proceedings, parents often say that parents should not be anxious that the CAPA would intend to “just take away the child” (C5) from them but that they were eager to support and help the family solve their problems; hence, it would make sense to cooperate rather than to oppose them.

In most of the parents’ accounts, we could identify a *strategy of narrative shift*. At a certain point the narratives shifted from the potentially failing parent towards the child’s wellbeing. In most parents’ presentations, we observed the justification discourse pointing out the main role and primary interest of the CAPA, which is to ensure the child’s wellbeing and that they would not focus on the parents lacking skills. “Because for the CAPA, it’s about the child, it’s not about saying that you’ve brought him up wrong. They don’t do that.” (C5). In all cases except for one, the CAPA is portrayed by parents as focusing on supporting the family to solve the conflictual family situation and on their duty to focus on children and not on parents. The CAPA members seem to often shift the narrative away from the parents towards the child’s wellbeing. This emphasis often seems to be gratefully taken up by parents. Nevertheless, the ambivalent feeling of parents concerning the questioning of fulfilling their parental role persists. This strategy also redistributes responsibility toward the child: in some cases, parents describe their child and his or her challenges and problems as one part of the source of the family troubles, as this mother’s quote shows:

*“Because basically I always thought, I am a good mummy, I do everything right. I look after my son properly. He is placed because it is simply not possible otherwise due to his situation. With school, with the whole thing, it was simply not acceptable for, for society.”*  
(C2)

### 3.3. Ambivalence around Specialized Knowledge: Parents Complying and Expressing Disagreement

Most parents report on uncertainty and ambivalence in cases of *disagreement* with the CAPA’s view even though they report on possibilities to express disagreement. This indicates contestation regarding who has specialized knowledge about the child, the parents or the CAPA. Overall, it seems that *compliance* was a strategy often used, as the risks of expressing disagreement or of opposing were deemed too high. Open opposition is mostly seen as pointless since parents clearly see the CAPA is in a more powerful position and they cannot leave the relationship.

One case (C3) strongly differs from the others in terms of how the parents interpret the role of ‘good’ parents in the context of the CAPA’s intervention, colliding with the CAPA’s expectations. Furthermore, their way of expressing disagreement or complying with the CAPA is worth highlighting. It serves as a case example of reasons for interactions that are perceived as intrusive and experienced as lacking recognition, violating parent’s integrity.

The situation was as follows: the eight-year-old child with special educational needs was placed in institutional care for two years with the original consent of his separated parents. The mother did not share the view on her child’s special needs, assessed by the CAPA and wanted the child to return home. She therefore moved to a different canton but there were difficulties finding a school offer for special educational needs. The CAPA, eager to ensure special needs education for the child, in consequence decided that the child had to remain permanently in institutional care, independent of the parents’ consent.

The father perceives the child protection authority as being an unquestionable authority and he is convinced he could not have expressed his disagreement about the permanent placement of his child without his rights being restricted as a consequence. He argues that he did not speak up against the CAPA’s decision because he feared this would be

interpreted as not wanting the best for his child and hence that he would not be fulfilling his parental role well. From his perspective, the best thing for the child must be to comply and do what the CAPA says, as an expert organization. In contrast to the father, the mother interpreted the fulfilment of her parental role by opposing, showing her disagreement with the child protection authority and fleeing to her country of origin with her child. In her view, her flight was a gesture of care towards her son, taking over her responsibility in her role as a parent. As a result of the mother's action, when she shortly after returned to Switzerland, the CAPA restricted the parental rights of both parents and placed the child back into institutional care permanently. Hence, the family experienced the CAPA as a controlling, judging, and even punishing authority. Nevertheless, both parents retrospectively came to judge the CAPA's decision as the best solution given the circumstances.

An underlying subject which arises in different cases is *specialized knowledge*, as described by Merton and Barber (1976). A shortcoming of their theorization is that the professional's authority and power position is seen as quite deterministic and strongly defines the inferior power position of the parents. Our data do not substantiate such a deterministic theorization. Instead, the interactions can be described as contested, and the term 'negotiation' better represents the nature of parents' experiences, as the previous case and the following example show.

A mother describes her ambivalent feelings at a "difficult meeting", organized by the CAPA and attended by many involved child protection professionals, during an escalating situation with her child (C2):

*"And Mr. Miller [CAPA], just listened and made up his mind and I didn't know: Is he on my side? Did he really hear me? Did he understand? Or are they only the educated ones, the ones who are really professional? Does their opinion then count more than mum's opinion who says 'Hey, that's my son!?' It's about him. And about me. And I know him much better than ((laughing)) all of you who are sitting there".*

In retrospect, she says that today she would be much more assertive as a mother with her specialized knowledge of her children and would not let herself be so easily impressed by experts (i.e., teachers) "who must know best". Parents' ambivalent feelings arise from the tension between perceiving and trusting the CAPA as an expert organization with extensive experience in child protection and family problems and perceiving themselves to be the experts on their child. They have had a very personal and long-lasting relationship, which is suddenly questioned by the CAPA's involvement and expert knowledge. Simultaneously, as elaborated earlier, parents mention a degree of dependence on the CAPA's support and specialized knowledge to solve their family's difficulties, but also express doubts regarding the CAPA's expertise of their family, making an ambivalence visible.

### 3.4. Reducing Ambivalence: Parents' View of CAPA's Strategies to Establish Trust and Re-Establish Parental Integrity

Our interviews revealed three key interactions identified by parents as fostering their agency and enabling their participation: First, parents felt supported by receiving adequate and *quick support* from the CAPA if needed. Second, parents reported that they felt they were given some *autonomy* in the proceedings, e.g., when they could influence the proceedings' timely progression or in other words, the speed of the proceedings. Third, parents felt they could *negotiate measures* with the CAPA. Those interactions are connected by parents feeling recognized and having their integrity respected, which seems to have fostered their trust in the CAPA. These experiences seemed to help to re-establish their initially threatened parental integrity.

All interviewed parents report that they gained trust in the CAPA when they received quick and adequate *support* in situations of emergency. As mentioned in the following citation, a turning point in the proceeding was described (C2): "Where I realised I can make a phone call, I am heard, my worries are heard. Also, the rest of the family is being taken care of [by the CAPA] and they act and they act fairly quickly and very competently". The feeling of being able to rely on the CAPA to take decisive actions, and that they teamed

up with the parents fosters a trusting relationship between the CAPA and the parents (e.g. C2, C4, C5). In some cases, it could be a turning point in the development of trust towards the authority.

Particular significance concerning the feeling of parents' *autonomy* seems to be connected to the possibility of influencing the temporal progression (speed) of the proceedings (substantiated by Petersen 2018). All parents reported on different phases during the proceedings: sometimes they felt the progression of the proceedings was not fast enough; in other moments, parents felt that the next steps were coming too fast to adjust emotionally, especially if a placement was envisaged. Case 7 is a good example of an overall positive assessment of the CAPA's intervention negatively affected by wrong timing: this single mother was struggling with her teenage boy who had dropped out of school. The professionals eventually managed to find a place in an institution with integrated schooling, but the teenage boy had to enter right away, leading to the cancellation of a long-expected family holiday. As a result, both the mother and the son fought against the measure when it was first announced. It is only in retrospect that they both agreed on its usefulness. Parents who experienced that their need to speed up or slow down the proceedings was respected by the CAPA felt recognized by being understood in their needs and in receiving individualized and case adequate support (in terms of recognition theory on the axis of love and solidarity). In such participative interactions, parents could gain trust in the CAPA as a reliable and helpful partner.

The feeling of participating was further fueled by experiences of being "involved" (Bouma et al. 2018) in a discursive manner, having some influence on the proceeding. Many parents report that the CAPA "suggested" measures or how to proceed (i.e., C4, C2), which facilitates a debate and *negotiation* and indicates there were at least deliberative moments in the decisional process. One divorced father (C1) describes how "actually, the decision was made, like, together. So together with the CAPA". A debate and negotiation of different possibilities as well as being informed on the content of reports (C5) or the opportunity to correct the written record of the hearing (C1; C2) made parents feel they had some power and influence on the proceedings.

It seems essential for a positive, integrity restoring experience that parents perceive the process to be influenceable and participatory: where parents receive support, are taken seriously by being acknowledged in their needs, are given some autonomy and are recognized as experts of their children, and their wishes and views are debated.

#### 4. Discussion

This article is based on the experiences of parents in their interactions with the Child and Adult Protection Authority (CAPA) in Switzerland. It explores parents' retrospectively reported views on interactions with the CAPA which hindered or enabled their participation during statutory child protection proceedings. The field of child protection is characterized by tensions due to the double mandate of care and control/intervention and the challenge to parents' participation in the context of potential coercion as Healy and Darlington (2009) pointed out. Hence, parents report on ambivalence in interactions with the CAPA. The sociology of ambivalence assigns the reasons for ambivalence to competing norms engrained in social roles such as those of parents or professionals in social interactions. Our data show that parents are sceptical towards the CAPA (often in the beginning), as holder of the power and feel anxious or ashamed about the intervention or experience self-doubt related to not adequately fulfilling the role of the 'good' parent (Merton and Barber 1976). Expressed in the language of recognition theory, parents do not feel recognized in their parental role since experiencing shame can be interpreted as a violation of their integrity. We could say that their parental integrity is fundamentally threatened by the mere opening of child protection proceedings. In this context, tensions and ambivalence are at the core of the interactions between parents and the authorities, even if these can be reduced significantly over time. The imbalance of power between professionals and parents contributes to ambivalence and

can generate negative feelings, but also positive ones when solutions are debated and found to support distressed parents.

We showed different strategies used by parents to handle this threat to parental integrity, such as strategies of differentiation and narrative shift, as well as an oscillation between compliance and expressing disagreement. While parents might be dependent on the specialized knowledge of the CAPA to a certain extent, they also want to restore their integrity by being recognized as experts on their own child and family. Given the fact that most parents feel ambivalent, fearful of the CAPA's intervention and threatened in their parental integrity in the beginning, our results suggest that over time and in concrete interactions, parents' integrity can be restored, enabling full participation. Therefore, from the viewpoint of parents, it seems crucial to re-establish parents' integrity through a trusting relationship with the CAPA in which they experience recognition, and they still have a degree of autonomy, for example, by influencing the speed of the progression of the proceedings (also supported by Petersen's research ([Petersen 2018](#))), as long as the child's wellbeing can be assured. In contrast, if integrity is not restored, parents experience recurring difficulties related to expressing themselves, feeling heard, or raising disagreement, which then hinders full participation.

We detected two key points for more participative and less coercive experiences of the proceedings from the parents' perspective: acting as a reliable and supportive authority and giving parents the opportunity to experience the proceedings as a deliberative process ([Habermas 1981](#)). Such interactions in which parents feel the CAPA is in fact exercising "power with" them in form of supporting them, giving them some autonomy promotes the full participation of parents and is also described and substantiated by Dumbrill's research (2006). This is an alternative to using power "over them" in the form of coercion ([Dumbrill 2006](#)). This echoes our previous findings in which we argue that integrity, autonomy and participation are strongly interrelated and advocate for its conceptualization as a nexus ([Schoch et al. 2020](#)).

Although the qualitative data of our study have some limitations due to the small sample size, the results of the analysis suggest an underlying ambivalence that interactions with the CAPA make parents feel that they did not live up to role expectations regarding adequate parenting. In order to fully participate, parents need their integrity to be restored by empathic, trustful interactions in which they experience recognition in order to reduce their ambivalent feelings and be in a position to benefit from the CAPA's support. With the theoretical focus on roles and social expectations towards the individual as the holder of a certain role, the theoretical concept of ambivalence complements the structural notion of the care and control/intervention concept. It also shapes the view on power asymmetries and delivers explanations as to how they fuel ambivalence among parents in interactions with CAPA members.

The strong focus on parents' experience in this article is in line with the call to recognize them as "people with needs" ([Featherstone et al. 2014](#)). It is challenging for professionals to ensure parents' integrity, autonomy and participation without losing sight of the child's wellbeing and giving him or her a voice, and to achieve a "family-minded humane practice" ([Featherstone et al. 2014](#)). Too strong a focus on a trustful relationship and cooperative process with the parents can bring with it the danger of overlooking endangerment situations and of downgrading the child's perspective. Precisely because inherent tensions and ambivalence in child protection proceedings remain unresolvable to a certain degree, it is even more important to reduce ambivalence by supporting interactions that preserve integrity, permit autonomy and hence ensure the participation of all concerned persons.

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