

Article

Children and childhood in Chile: Social worker perspectives

by

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Abstract

English

This study explores understandings of children and childhood among 21 social workers from five child protection services in Chile. To help grasp multiple ideas about children and childhood, we use Q methodology and the 'child visibility' concept. The object is to explore dissimilar and/or similar views on child visibility among social workers and the characteristics of these viewpoints. The results reveal three distinct views on child visibility. Based on the characteristics of these perspectives, we have conceptualized the workers associated with them as: activists, buffers and experts. The *activists* vigorously seek children's own perspectives, and produce an image of capable children with unique perspectives. The *buffers* and the *experts*, however, typically define children's needs from their own perspectives. Nevertheless, through differing logics, the *experts* focus on children's vulnerability and protection needs, while the *buffers* are more inclined to view children in terms of their contextual risk and on the margins in an underfunded child protection context. Despite these differences, there are shared viewpoints among the social workers, for example, by understanding children as relational. The results are discussed in light of current theory within childhood studies.

Keywords: child protection, Chile, social workers, understandings of children and childhood, Q methodology

Spanish

Niños e infancia en Chile: Perspectivas de los trabajadores sociales.

Este estudio explora las concepciones que sobre los niños y la infancia desarrollan 21 trabajadores sociales de cinco servicios de protección infantil en Chile. Para comprender estas múltiples ideas, utilizamos la Metodología Q y el concepto de "visibilidad del niño". El objeto es explorar perspectivas similares o diferentes respecto a la visión que tienen los trabajadores sociales sobre este grupo social, así como las características de esos puntos de vista. Los resultados revelan tres tipos de visión distintivos sobre los niños. Con base a las características de estas tres perspectivas, hemos conceptualizado a los trabajadores sociales asociados con ellas como: activistas, baluartes, y expertos. Los activistas buscan vigorosamente las

perspectivas de los propios infantes y producen una imagen de que los niños poseen capacidades y perspectivas únicas. Los otros dos grupos, sin embargo, típicamente definen las necesidades de los niños desde sus propias representaciones. A través de lógicas distintas, los expertos se enfocan en la vulnerabilidad de los infantes y sus necesidades de protección; mientras los baluartes están más inclinados a ver a los niños en términos de sus propios riesgos contextuales, y en los márgenes de un contexto de protección infantil con financiación insuficiente. A pesar de estas diferencias, existen puntos de vista comunes entre los trabajadores sociales, por ejemplo, al entender a los niños en términos relacionales. Estos resultados son discutidos a la luz de las teorías actuales dentro de los estudios de la infancia.

Palabras clave: protección infantil, Chile, trabajadores sociales, concepciones sobre los niños y la infancia, metodología Q

Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989) constitutes one of the most powerful childhood discourses globally. The convention emphasizes that children have the right to be *protected* from discrimination, abuse and neglect, and to be ensured the *provision* of family support, adequate education, health care, shelter and food. In addition, the convention encourages *participation* on issues relating to children and youth.

All United Nations member countries, with the exception of the United States, have ratified the CRC. Even so, child welfare and protection systems vary internationally (Gilbert, Parton, & Skivenes, 2011), and social workers' understandings of children and childhood are constructed and reconstructed socially (James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998). The understanding and execution of the CRC probably varies accordingly, as social workers are important translators of current political ideologies into practical measures (Lipsky, 2010). As such, their understandings of children and childhood are relevant to explore. Findings from a recent integrative review of previous child welfare and protection research (Jensen, Studsrød, & Ellingsen, 2018) suggest that efforts remain in realizing the broad commitment of children's rights in practice. Children and youth are primarily constructed by the social worker's own child perspective without employing the children's perspectives (Sommer, Samuelsson, & Hundeide, 2010). In the latter, children themselves have a role in defining their own sense of self and what they need. Moreover, children and youth are typically visible through a narrow lens, as only certain generalized characteristics of the child's situation or the child are made relevant. In sum, this review showed that children are primarily viewed as vulnerable beings in need of protection, with less attention given to children's participation and provision needs. Although the review demonstrated that there is emerging research on how children are understood by social workers, most research published in English journals has been from European or US contexts (Jensen et al., 2018). Limited research exists from Latin American contexts, with the exception of some studies indirectly exploring social workers' understandings of children and childhood (Studsrød, Ellingsen, Guzmán, & Espinoza, 2018; Ursin, Oltedal, & Muñoz, 2016).

In this study, we explore social workers' understandings of children and childhood in child protection services (CPS) in Chile, and seek to fill a contextual knowledge gap in current research. Furthermore, as a response to a call for more flexible conceptual research understandings on children and childhood (e.g. Hanson, 2017; Uprichard, 2008), we apply the 'child visibility' concept to help facilitate the exploration of multiple ideas about children and childhood. To explore social workers' perspectives on child visibility, we use Q methodology (QM), which aims to reveal patterns of subjective viewpoints on a research topic among participants (Brown, 1993). QM is one of the few methods that can produce holistic data and identify the multivalence and relationship among ideas (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This enables us to explore what social workers give significance to, and how they link their ideas of children and childhood. The overall focus of this study is to explore dissimilar and/or similar views on child visibility among social workers and the characteristics of these viewpoints.

Background

Chile ratified the CRC in 1990, the same year democracy was reinstated after 17 years of dictatorship. Chile has embraced a neo-liberal economy and, since the 1990s, the country has experienced high economic growth. Yet, economic growth does not necessarily alleviate poverty, and with the second-highest Gini coefficient among OECD countries, Chile's income inequality is high (UNICEF, 2017). Because access to good welfare services primarily rests on income (Maclure, 2014), the family is an important welfare provider vis-a-vis the state. Social security for children is mostly based on the family unit and the social benefits the household may or may not have (Fernández, 2016). A high number of children are in alternative care in Chile due to socio-economic reasons, with Garcia Quiroga and Hamilton-Giachritsis (2014) arguing that proactive financial and social interventions are needed to support families in socio-economical constraints.

The child protection system in Chile is primarily privatized, although the National Service of Minors (SENAME) provides supervision and partial financial support to organizations (30–50% of what is needed) (Hogar de Cristo, 2017). In most cases, organizations have limited additional resources, and they depend on charity for funding, which is likely to impact service quality (Garcia Quiroga, & Hamilton-Giachritsis, 2014). Several reports have stressed poor conditions in alternative care.

For example, in 2013 an initial investigation denounced neglect and abuse within residential care settings (Cámara de Diputados, 2013), and a recent report revealed state neglect in more than 850 deaths of children and youth under state custody since 2005 (United Nations Organization, 2018). Similarly, the last concluding observations from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (2015) and the Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos (2017) pointed to several child welfare and protection concerns, such as high levels of violence against children and youth in the home, and persistent discriminatory attitudes and actions against indigenous children. They also raised concerns about the absence of formal structures for children's participation, and how their opinions are taken into account. Even though the CRC is incorporated into domestic laws, it has been argued that 'the best interest of the child' has been narrowly interpreted in Latin America as an assurance of protection, with a negligent focus on children's provision and participation rights (Maclure, 2014).

Theoretical framework

A point of departure in this study is the distinction between a 'child perspective' and 'children's perspective' (Sommer et al., 2010). The latter emphasizes children's own perspectives, held only by the children themselves, while a child perspective is an adult's attempt to deliberately and as realistically as possible achieve an understanding of children's perspectives (Sommer et al., 2010). This study seeks an understanding of how children are made visible by social workers in CPS in Chile. Thus, a third distinction arises: the adult perspective revealing children's visibility in everyday practice. Through this, we can gain knowledge of the potentialities and barriers for a child perspective in Chilean CPS.

Moreover, we draw on current theory within childhood studies on time and temporality (e.g. Hanson, 2017; Uprichard, 2008). Ideas of 'being' and 'becoming' are central to childhood studies. While the *being* child is seen as a competent actor in the present tense, the *becoming* child is seen as an adult in formation. Currently, the understanding of children as either becomings or beings is questioned (Uprichard, 2008). For example, Hanson (2017) claims that this binary understanding ignores that children also have a past, and therefore argues for a trielectical understanding of children, acknowledging that they are simultaneously 'beings, becomings and beens'.

Hence, this suggests a relationship between the past, present and the future (Hanson, 2017). We argue that this threefold understanding is significant for practice in CPS, as children's past and present are significant for improving children's present and future life situations.

Method

In this QM study, participants were presented with a set of statements covering different ideas of children and childhood, and asked to rank these along a dimension from 'most like' to 'most unlike' their viewpoints/experiences. The participants' sorting of statements was then by-person factor analysed. The resulting factors disclose how *participants* are grouped with other participants who share subjective views by similarly sorting the statements (Watts & Stenner, 2012).

Materials

The generation of statements for a QM study builds on concourse theory, which involves the universe of statements surrounding a topic (Brown, 1980; Stephenson, 1953). Statements can stem from different materials, such as interviews, literature and/or art (Brown, 1993). In this study, statements were developed from a review of scientific articles and the CRC, as well as interviews and focus group interviews with social workers. To prevent the dominance of Western views of children and childhood, two dialogue seminars with multinational master's students in social work were held, in which students shared their views of how children and youth are visible in their national contexts. Finally, experts on child welfare/protection were consulted (see Table 1). It was crucial that statements covered a broad range of facets on the topic to allow different perspectives to emerge. Moreover, it was important that statements were mutually relevant for social workers in Chile and Norway, as this study is part of a larger comparative PhD project.

Table 1: The six materials used to develop statements on ‘child visibility’

Material 1	The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
Material 2	Scientific articles
Material 3	Semi-structured interviews on ‘child visibility’ with social workers (n=3) in Norway familiar with child welfare/protection
Material 4*	Focus group interviews with social workers in child protection services: Mexico (n=7), Chile (n=4) and Norway (n=15)
Material 5	Conversations with child welfare/protection experts in Chile and Norway
Material 6	Two dialogue seminars with international social work master’s students (more than 10 different nationalities)

*Note: Material 4 was collected by the research team in the Welfare State Futures-funded project ‘Family Complexity and Social Work’ (<https://welfarestatefutures.org/research-network/facsk-family-complexity-and-social-work-a-comparative-study-of-family-based-welfare-work-in-different-welfare-regimes/>).

This procedure generated a large number of possible statements, referred to as the identified concourse in QM (Stephenson, 1953). Inspired by Fisher’s balanced block design (see Stephenson, 1953), we reduced the materials into a manageable and representative set of 39 statements (see statements in Table 3 in the Results section). These statements contain easy, self-referent language with no context-dependent terms. The first author collaborated with multiple translators to achieve comparable statements in Norwegian and Spanish (by back-and-forth translation). Finally, after statements were piloted with social workers in Norway and Chile, the wording of statements was further adjusted for clarity.

Participants

Various organizations and services were contacted with a strategic aim of obtaining social worker viewpoints from multiple CPS in Chile, thereby resulting in a purposive sample of 21 participants with social work licences and current positions in CPS. The final sample (19 females and two males) covered work in five different CPS, including diagnostic programmes in relation to family court (n=7), intervention (n=6), rehabilitation and/or therapeutic programmes for child victims of sexual abuse or sexual exploitation/trafficking (n=4) and residential care (n=4). All except for one participant work in a private child protection organization supervised and partially financed by SENAME. Fourteen participants described their occupational position as ‘social worker’, while seven hold a director or coordinator position.

explain why they identified some statements as 'most like' and 'most unlike' their viewpoints/experiences. The individual Q-sortings were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by a native Chilean. The first author and a research assistant, who spoke Spanish fluently, participated during all Q-sorts to safeguard the validity of the results and ethical aspects.

The research project was ethically evaluated and approved by the Data Protection Official for Research (NSD) (project no. 49334). Participants did not give identifiable information about specific children or cases. A researcher at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile was involved in securing ethical requirements in Chile, and the study was part of the Welfare State Futures-funded project Family Complexity and Social Work.

Analysis and interpretation

The Q-sorts from the 21 participants were entered into the software programme PQ Method (Schmolck, 2002). The way participants sorted the statements was then subject to a by-person factor analysis. Different factor solutions based on principal component analysis with Varimax rotation were explored in the search for the most informative factor solution for interpretation. A three-factor solution yielded the clearest perspectives, with a significant factor loading for 18 of the 21 social workers.

Table 2 shows participants' factor loadings for each of the three factors. Q-sorts marked with an X have significant loading on a factor that also explains more than half of the common variance (Watts & Stenner, 2012). While *factor loadings* indicate the degree to which the participants' Q-sorts correlate with a factor, the *factor* represents the typical way of sorting the statements by the participants loading significantly on that factor. Table 3 in the Results section shows the configuration of the statements for each of the three factors. Participant 11 had a significant *negative* loading on Factor B, revealing an opposite view of what that factor actually represents. Therefore, we chose to exclude this participant from further analysis so the remaining Q-sorts could define Factor B. Furthermore, two participants (3 and 4) revealed a perspective partially associated with Factors A and C, but neither factors explained more than half of the common variance for these participants.

Table 2: Factor matrix, with X indicating those participants' Q-sorts that load significantly ($p < 0.05$) on a factor, and that explains more than half of the common variance

Q-Sort	Factor A	Factor B	Factor C
Participant 1	0.3046	-0.0565	0.6472X
Participant 2	0.4180	0.0356	0.4799X
Participant 3	0.4630	0.3064	0.4430
Participant 4	0.4314	0.2444	0.4476
Participant 5	0.2964	-0.1216	0.7721X
Participant 6	0.5781X	0.2604	0.4656
Participant 7	0.5751X	0.3815	0.2592
Participant 8	0.4120	0.6181X	0.0090
Participant 9	0.1368	0.5167X	0.4085
Participant 10	0.6348X	-0.1276	0.2250
Participant 11	0.3109	-0.6125	0.1785
Participant 12	0.0100	0.1373	0.7516X
Participant 13	0.3333	0.2536	0.4513X
Participant 14	0.6851X	0.1113	0.0910
Participant 15	0.7679X	0.1440	0.2201
Participant 16	0.6701X	0.3548	0.2159
Participant 17	0.6037X	0.1434	0.0910
Participant 18	0.6225X	0.0441	0.4134
Participant 19	0.2924	0.5179X	0.2614
Participant 20	0.1412	0.4154	0.6338X
Participant 21	0.8652X	0.0758	0.1611
Total significant Q-sorts	9	3	6

Taken together, the three factors accounted for 54% of the explained variance in social workers' viewpoints/experiences (Factor A=25%, Factor B=10% and Factor C=19%). The correlations between the factors were moderate, ranging from 0.44 to 0.59, which implies that the three factors have features in common, but also include themes that distinguish one perspective from another. To interpret all factor configurations, the crib sheet approach was used (Watts & Stenner, 2012). This involved identifying the statements given the highest (+4) and lowest (-4) rankings, together with statements ranked higher or lower by one factor than by any of the other factors. We also examined distinguishing statements (underlined factor scores in Table 3), which are significantly unique statements for each specific factor. In addition, participants' qualitative reflections upon statements provided important insights for the interpretation of factors.

Strengths and limitations

QM aims to reveal subjective viewpoints among participants; however, this study cannot be generalized beyond this sample due to the small sample size. Moreover, when identifying the concourse, more data were collected in Norway than Chile. As

argued in QM literature, this is of less importance, as the main concern is not the statements themselves but the relative interpretations and overall understandings that inform the participants' engagement with the statements (Watts & Stenner, 2012). Additionally, during the Q-sorts, participants expressed that the statements were relevant to their work contexts. Doing research in another country certainly also raises some potential limitations, for example, language barriers and assistance from Spanish speakers and native Chileans was necessary to carry out this study. That said, although the first author is Norwegian, she has Spanish-speaking competencies and experience from living in Latin America, which adds strength to the study.

Results

Our analysis reveals three different perspectives (factors) on child visibility among the social workers. Based on the characteristics of these perspectives, we have conceptualized the workers associated with them as *activists*, *buffers* and *experts*, along with a characteristic feature of how children are seen within these perspectives. This section provides a summary of what characterizes the three factors. Reference is made to the placement of individual statements regarding each of the three factors (see Table 3), together with reflections made by participants during the Q-sorts (in *italics*).

Table 3: Factor scores for each of the 39 statements

No.	Statement	Factor		
		A	B	C
1*	In the child protection sector, it is first and foremost important to view the child as part of the family, and not as a single individual.	4	4	4
2	It's often difficult to trust what teenagers are saying because I'm not always sure they are telling me the truth.	-3	<u>1</u>	-3
3	Children with other ethnical-cultural backgrounds are less seen and heard in child protection practice than other children.	<u>3</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>-4</u>
4	I think children inherit their parents' problems.	-1	-1	<u>2</u>
5	Children who, on their own initiative, express their personal opinions get to participate to a greater extent than children who don't.	2	2	<u>0</u>
6	The worst thing that can happen to a child is that we separate him/her from his/her family.	2	3	<u>-3</u>
7	I never trust second-hand information about how the child is doing; therefore, I always talk to the child myself.	0	<u>-2</u>	<u>1</u>
8	Children are not sufficiently independent to make their own decisions.	<u>-3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>0</u>
9	Frequently, the social worker (and not the children themselves) defines the interests and needs of the child.	<u>0</u>	<u>-4</u>	<u>3</u>
10	Depending on the family composition, there exists the danger that children's needs are not covered in certain forms.	<u>-4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>1</u>
11	I always give the child an opportunity to contribute, independent of age and maturity.	4	4	<u>2</u>
12*	As a social worker, I think that it is more difficult to work with children in families from higher social classes than lower social classes.	-1	-2	-1
13*	Some children receive help more easily because they appeal more to the social worker.	-2	-3	-3
14*	It's important for me to hear the parents' story before I hear the children's story.	0	-2	-2
15*	Many social workers think it's difficult to know what to talk to the children about and how to do it.	0	-1	1
16	It's important for me to communicate in written documents the child's point of view regarding the case.	4	<u>1</u>	4
17	It's difficult to trust what children are saying because they are manipulated by their parents.	<u>-3</u>	0	0
18	The child's gender plays a role in how they are talked to and involved in their own case.	<u>-2</u>	0	0
19	I feel less responsibility for children when they are approaching the age of majority.	-4	-3	-1
20*	I think physical punishment can be fine so that the child will learn.	-4	-4	-4
21	Many social workers talk to children because it is mandatory, and not because it is important for the child.	-2	<u>3</u>	-2
22	Parents decide if the child becomes visible in their own case.	<u>0</u>	-3	-2
23	Children's challenging behaviour easily becomes dominant and prevents me from seeing other aspects of the child.	0	-1	<u>-4</u>
24*	It is unethical for the child to reveal parents' problems.	-2	-1	-1
25	It is important for me that the child gets to read through what I write about them in written documents.	0	<u>-3</u>	0
26	Our responsibility is first and foremost to make sure that children's basic needs are covered.	3	<u>1</u>	4
27*	We quickly create an image of the child, even though we don't know the child that well.	1	0	1
28	It is expected that we evaluate children's needs based on standardized formats.	<u>2</u>	0	0
29*	It is important that we write down all details in the case so that the child, with time, can get to know his/her own history.	1	1	1
30	We have knowledge that makes us most capable of evaluating what's in the child's best interest.	1	3	3

31	Children don't tell because they are afraid of possible negative consequences.	2	0	<u>3</u>
32*	You shouldn't involve the child at all costs; the protection aspect is the most important in the end.	<u>3</u>	2	2
33	Children have a strong position in the child protection sector in comparison to the parents.	<u>-1</u>	1	2
34*	There is too much focus on talking with the child in today's child protection sector.	-1	-2	-1
35	It is problematic if the parents get to know what we have discussed with the child.	<u>1</u>	-1	-1
36*	The framework we work within makes it difficult to make sure that children receive sufficient help/what they need.	3	<u>4</u>	3
37	Adults can contribute to informing about children's situation better than the child can.	-3	<u>2</u>	-2
38	Generally speaking, I think we have a good way of raising children in Chile.	-1	<u>-4</u>	0
39	Often, children do not want to talk to us, but we need to talk to the children even if they don't want to.	1	0	<u>-3</u>
Explained variance		25%	10%	19%

Note: Underlining values signifies distinguishing statement values for the specific factor at a significance level $p < 0.05$. Statements marked * signify consensus statements.

Factor A: The activists – ‘children are capable and unique’ (n=9)

The perspective represented by Factor A is conceptualized as being that of *activists* advocating for children and youth, and acknowledging their perspective as important for child protection practice. To these social workers, children are viewed as capable and unique. More specifically, it is important to give children the opportunity to contribute, independent of age and maturity (11: +4 [statement number: factor ranking]), and to communicate the child's point of view in written documents (16: +4). They also disagree that children are not independent enough to make their own decisions (8: -3). They see every child as unique, and they do not feel less responsibility for children approaching the age of maturity, and that children are not treated differently because of gender (19: -4; 18: -2). The activists view children as trustworthy, although they recognize that manipulation by parents occurs (17: -3). Overall, these workers disagree that some children receive help more easily because they appeal more to the social worker (13: -2).

The activists stressed that all voices are important in a child protection case. Although they highlight their competence as social workers, they do not see themselves as the most capable of judging what is in the child's best interest (30: +1). They talk about different discourses and constructions of reality, with one worker expressing, *‘I think we have knowledge, but that knowledge has a limitation, and that*

limitation is that it is our own knowledge' (P10). The activists do not believe adults can inform the case *better* than children can (37: -3). Rather than being a question of either/or (e.g. hearing the parents' story before the child's story) (14: 0), these workers value multiple perspectives as jointly important for successful child protection work.

Despite considering children to be important contributors with their own perspectives, the activists do not think children have a strong position in the child protection system (33: -1), as emphasized by this quote: *'I think they [children/youth] don't have the position they should have...because the adults' opinion is more valued, basically'* (P21). These workers view children with other ethnic-cultural backgrounds to be especially vulnerable in the child protection system (3: +3). In the qualitative comments given by workers, 'other ethnic-cultural background' was frequently associated with children with indigenous Mapuche backgrounds, and one worker stated that children with indigenous backgrounds *'...are completely invisible because we have a political constitution that does not recognize the native peoples'* (P10). Moreover, even though the activists do not feel less responsibility for children approaching age of maturity (19: -4), they problematize inadequate service provision for older children. As one worker states, *'There is a saying here [...] that with small children, small problems, with big children, big problems'* (P16). According to these workers, the child protection system prioritizes provision needs, and workers link the material provision orientation to broader societal values: *'I think the topic of basic needs, at least for us, in our country, probably has centred on super-material aspects more than emotional'* (P21). To these workers, emotional needs are pivotal, and the family dynamic is more important to children's well-being than the family composition itself (10: -4). Nevertheless, social workers experience expectations of evaluating children's needs based on standards, and their main responsibility is to make sure children's basic needs are covered (28: +2; 26: +3).

Factor B: The buffers – 'children are at risk' (n=3)

While Factor A is formed by the views of workers from multiple child protection services, participants associated with Factor B are from residential care (n=2) and a diagnostic programme (n=1). Overall, this perspective reveals a distrust in the child protection system, with severe consequences for children. Children are viewed in

light of-, and these workers are concerned with, the 'real life' regarding the services and what these children and young people are entering into. Participants associated with Factor B are conceptualized as *buffers* because they attempt to compensate for system inadequacies, though with apparent limitations.

Similar to the activists, the buffers stress the importance of the child's opportunity to contribute (11: +4). Still, these workers are more reluctant towards children making their own *decisions* (8: +2). One social worker expressed that a child making his/her own decisions depends on the issue: *'They are not independent to choose which school they should go to or about homework or therapy they have to take, but [the child] can say if they do not want to be close to the family'* (P9). The buffers do not strongly value the child's viewpoints in written documents (16: +1), and do not think the child should read these documents (25: -3). One worker explained, *'If a child takes out his or her folder, it is taken away immediately because there are analyses that they do not understand, and if they see it quickly, they could misinterpret it'* (P9). Although these workers see hindrances in involving children in their work, they do not think social workers define children's interests and needs (9: -4). Even so, they believe adults can inform the case better than children (37: +2), and they disagree that they never trust second-hand information about how the child is doing (7: -2). Although these workers are confident they have knowledge that makes them most capable of judging what is in the child's best interest (30: +3), they suspect that many social workers talk with children out of obligation, and not because it is important to the child (21: +3).

The buffers are negative regarding Chilean upbringing (38: -4), and one worker explained that it neglects the children's present well-being:

In Chile, it is all aimed at the professional goal, that the child, when he or she leaves the residence, is successful, but there is no talk of the child being happy or being able to build a loving relationship with a partner that is healthy. There is no talk of that. No, all the hopes are that they enter into university, get a degree, that they will be successful and have a salary that allows [the children] to live. But we do not raise them for happiness. That is why we have children who are frustrated and who repeat patterns later on. (P9)

These workers agree that the family composition can jeopardize the child's needs (10: +3). Nonetheless, they translate 'family composition' as socio-economic factors: *'The composition of the family has an effect, but it depends on the area. If it is*

economic, it clearly will affect a single mother with five children' (P8). That said, they believe family separation is the worst thing that can happen to a child (6: +3), which can be seen in relation to limitations of, and within, the Chilean child protection system:

In Chile, SENAME is an institution that does not function [...] it is one of the institutions that violate the rights of the children the most. But it is an institutional violation – there is sexual abuse, there are professionals who do not have experience, there are educators who are like the children's mothers, who abuse. So, sometimes the system itself violates even more than the families. (P9)

The buffers emphasized that the system they work in is poor (36: +4). For example, one working in residential care explained that there is a ratio of one social worker per 15 children at the residence where she works. She continued, '*Here you do not work until 6 pm. It is Monday to Sunday and 24/7 [...] and nobody asks you if you have rested*' (P9). The worker described the absence of safety measures for staff, poor physical conditions and going home from work crying because she is tired. Another residence worker has experienced the child protection system as increasingly reactive, resulting in children with severe problems entering into residential care.

Factor C: The experts – 'children are vulnerable' (n=6)

The perspective revealed by Factor C is conceptualized as those of *experts*, and emphasizes the importance of protecting children and providing for their basic needs, which may challenge children's participation. The six participants associated with Factor C work in different areas of child protection.

First, these workers centre their attention on children's basic needs (26: +4). Yet, they underscore that the notion of basic needs not only involves physical needs, such as food, clothes and health, but also recreation, participation and emotional needs. Though these workers see the importance of children's participation rights, for example, by involving them and communicating their viewpoints in written documents (11: 2; 16: +4), they express that practice has not yet arrived at a stage in which children's participation rights are incorporated. To some extent, they think other social workers lack the competence to talk with children, and therefore find this difficult (15: +1). Furthermore, in the comments provided by the participants, they expressed a reluctance towards child participation due to the child's age, the topic and the potential damage participation may inflict on the child. Although these

workers partially agree that they do not trust second-hand information about how the child is doing (7: +1), they believe it is better to rely on information the child has told someone they trust than to go straight to the child for information. They strongly disagree that children should talk if they do not want to, and they believe an important reason for children not wanting to talk is that they are afraid of the potential negative consequences (39: -3; 31: +3), such as being separated from their family. These workers believe in the superior knowledge of professionals and adults in deciding what is best for children (9: +3; 30: +3). One worker said, *'We will always look for adults who explain what the interests or needs of children are, and we also define them from our own experience, thinking that we have the expertise to do so'* (P12).

For these workers, family separation is not the worst thing that can happen to a child (6: -3), as their uppermost priority is to protect children from harm (32: +2). For this reason, they think the child has a stronger position in the child protection system than parents (33: +2). The experts do not think children with other ethnical-cultural backgrounds are treated differently than others (3: -4), and they do not see children's challenging behaviour as a hindrance to seeing other aspects of the child (23: -4). Although these workers do not necessarily feel less responsibility for children approaching the age of majority (19: -1), they believe older children are more resilient: *'...one feels or expects [older children] to have the tools to survive in very adverse contexts, and we see that every day in relation to a teenager versus an infant'* (P12).

Consensus ideas

Even though the perspectives presented above illustrate significantly different viewpoints, there are also converging ideas among workers irrespective of factor loadings (12 statements marked with * in Table 3). These statements concern the following themes: (i) understanding children as relational, (ii) the child protection system, (iii) class, and (iv) the relationship between protection and participation. In the presentation below, statement numbers are provided in parentheses.

First, the social workers find it important to view the child in a collective and systemic perspective – as part of the family, rather than a single individual (1). One worker stated:

Yes, in every sense, I think it is important to not consider them [children] as a single [...] because working with one or considering that the problems focus on one person is to point out that the problem is in that person, and that there is no context that could propitiate the conflictive element. (P21)

These workers do not think it is unethical for children to reveal parents' problems (24), as parents' problems *are* children's problems in terms of their systemic understanding.

Second, all social workers reported that the framework they work within fails to ensure that children receive sufficient help or support for their needs (36). Although some workers referred to the specific child protection service where they work, most pointed to the broader child protection system. In the additional comments provided by the participants, poor cooperation among services (e.g. health, school and mental health), an adult-centric court system and the limited quality of services provided were described.

Third, class is not considered relevant for how children are treated (12). However, workers have little actual practice experience working with children and families of a higher socio-economic class. Some workers emphasized that child protection in Chile is restricted to lower-class families, and that child protection offices in upper-class districts barely exist.

The last theme concerns the relationship between protection and participation. Protection is viewed as the most important mandate in child protection work and that, at all costs, children should not be involved (32). Moreover, written reports are not seen as considerably important, in a future perspective, for children to know their history (29). However, the rationalities for this differ. Whereas some workers expressed that children know their story, and that the social worker's version of the story always will be a construction, other workers underscored that some details should be left out: *'We work with life books, for example, where the family and the ones taking care of the child write the most beautiful details or the most important in*

relation to the children' (P12). This quote implies conserving the good stories and concealing the bad.

The workers are also fairly neutral concerning social workers' competence in talking with children, and they do not think some children receive help more easily because they appeal to the social worker (15; 13). In Chile, some social workers work in pairs (duplas) with psychologists, and talking with children is seen as the psychologists' domain, which may explain this fairly neutral position. Even though the workers emphasized the importance of protection, they do not think there is too much focus on talking with children (34).

Discussion

This study shows differing perspectives on children and childhood among social workers. A key difference relates to the value and relevance given to children's own perspectives and the opportunities and hindrances regarding a child perspective in CPS.

More specifically, the activist perspective reveals a belief in children as capable actors with unique perspectives. This belief aligns with the child perspective seeking to grasp children's perspectives and value children's knowledge derived from their own experiences (Sommer et al., 2010). Such a perspective promotes children's participation and focuses on children's everyday life. However, the results reveal that the buffers and experts are more reluctant towards children participating in child protection work. Both have a view of the superior knowledge of adults in constructing children's needs and, hence, strongly rely on an *external* child perspective in their work (Warming, 2011). In so doing, the workers incorporate and rely on their own knowledge and past work experience as a generalized palette of knowledge to form their viewpoints of what children need in the present and when becoming adults. Nevertheless, their logics for this adult-centric orientation differ. While the experts produce an image of a vulnerable child with shortcomings who needs provision and protection by adults, the buffers are more inclined to view children in a *contextual* risk and on the margins. Dependent on an underfunded and constrained child protection system, children are vulnerable without family support and with few viable alternatives for future life-supporting prospects. When resources are limited, social

workers may feel restricted in their practice (Lipsky, 2010); alleviating risk and provision needs may therefore be experienced as more critical than actively seeking children's perspectives.

Blending into these perspectives is a dynamic interplay of children's past, present and future (Hanson, 2017). For instance, written reports were not seen as considerably important in a future perspective for the child to know his/her history. The activists also consider indigenous children to be particularly vulnerable in the child protection system, with strong associations to what has been, bonding the child to their roots and a cultural heritage inclined towards discrimination. Workers in our study criticized the Chilean upbringing for being too concerned about qualifications for future adulthood, rather than focusing on children's current everyday life situations. The focus lies on how the adult can support, qualify and build children's futures, for example, through education to create successful citizens of tomorrow. The same critique was raised regarding the child protection system, as workers experience an orientation towards material provision lacking a focus on children's current well-being.

These results suggest that there are challenges in seeing and valuing children as been, beings and becomings in Chilean child protection practice. In general, parents and families are significant persons in children's past, present and future. This make these children vulnerable without family support, as the family naturally represents a continuity for the child and, thereby, an important link between these discourses.

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