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Use of the Parents Preference Test in Child Custody Evaluations: Preliminary Development of Conforming Parenting Index

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Abstract

The Parents Preference Test (PPT) is a graphical test comprised of 24 easy to understand images of daily family life, which is widely used in forensic assessments of parenting skills. Nevertheless, the PPT lacks validity scales to detect participants' attitudes toward the test; this is an important oversight, as the tendency to demonstrate faking-good parenting behaviors is common in child custody litigants. Study 1 aimed at identifying the differences in PPT responses between a normative/control group ($N = 110$) and a sample of parents undergoing a psychological evaluation of parenting ability ($N = 99$). Chi-square goodness of fit tests showed significant differences in answer preferences between groups in 11 vignettes (almost half of the total PPT items). Study 2 aimed at developing an index to detect faking-good behaviors. On the 11 vignettes in which significant differences in answer preferences were found in Study 1, the alternatives chosen with the highest frequency by the forensic group were added to an index called the "Conforming Parenting Index" (CPI). The area under the curve (AUC) of a receiver operating characteristic (ROC) curve for a sample of 58 participants who completed the PPT under both standard and faking-good instructions demonstrated good classification accuracy ($AUC = .813$).

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1. Introduction

Assessment of parenting capacity and fitness is a central task in child custody evaluations, in order to guarantee that the best interests of the child are met (Ortega & Berger, 2016). The term "parenting capacity" was used in the Framework for the assessment of children in need and their families (Department of Health, 2000) to refer to "the ability of parents or caregivers to ensure that the child's developmental needs are being appropriately and adequately responded to, and to adapt to his or her changing needs over time" (p. 20).

Accordingly, an assessment of parenting is important in highly conflictual marital separations, in situations where a child is temporarily deprived of a suitable family environment, and in situations in which one or both parents behaves prejudicially towards the child (Verrocchio, Marchetti, & Cortini, 2012; Verrocchio et al., 2018). The lack of effective recognition of dysfunctional parenting practices can be detrimental to the child's mental health. Previous research has widely confirmed the negative impact of high-conflict separation or divorce on children (Baker & Verrocchio, 2015; Camisasca, Miragoli, & Di Blasio, 2019; Verrocchio, Marchetti, & Fulcheri, 2015). The parenting skills assessment (Guidelines for child custody evaluations; APA, 2010) is a patchwork assessment in which the parent's general psychological characteristics (including possible psychopathology), internalization of parenting models, adult attachment representation, and parenting skills with offspring (even in the absence of offspring, in cases where the child has been removed from the parent's care) are evaluated. In addition to following this multi-informant and multi-method procedure, the assessment of parenting skills is also evidence-based and follows an integrated approach.

With respect to the general psychological and psychopathological features of parents implicated in post-divorce child custody disputes, several studies have focused on personality traits using MMPI-2 scales (Roma, Pazzelli, Pompili, Girardi, & Ferracuti, 2013). In their research, Roma and colleagues (2014) considered 509 parents (247 couples) undergoing an MMPI-2 (Butcher et al., 2001) assessment in a child custody dispute. The results showed that women appeared deeply motivated to display a faking-good defensive profile, together with lower levels of cynicism and antisocial behaviors; they described themselves as socially desirable, conventional, conformist, loyal, and fair (L scale), and showed a higher tendency to deny faults and complaints (K scale) and exaggerated benevolence and elevated morality (S scale), compared to men. A recent paper (Mazza et al., 2019a) implemented a research design involving a large sample ($N = 400$) of child custody litigants, using the MMPI-2-RF (Ben-Porath & Tellegen, 2008). Results have confirmed previous findings obtained by Roma et al. (2014). In addition to personality inventories such as the MMPI-2 and MMPI-2-RF, projective measures such as the Rorschach (Exner, 2003) and the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT; Murray, 1943) have been frequently used, alongside the clinical interview.

Another important area of consideration in the assessment of parenting skills is parents' mental representations of childhood attachment experiences. In the literature, it is assumed that an adult's evaluation of childhood experiences becomes organized into a relatively stable "state of mind" (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985, p. 68). This parents' state of mind strongly determines the quality of their child's attachment to them (van Ijzendoorn, 1995). One of the most important measures in this respect is the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main et al., 1985)—

a semi-structured interview that assesses an individual's "state of mind" in terms of attachment (Aceti et. al., 2012; Giacchetti et al., 2019).

Nevertheless, in the parental skills evaluation there are still very few instruments that can directly assess the parent-child dyadic relationship. This issue is particularly important and interesting for researchers, considering that the assessment is often carried out in specific situations, such as: when a child is removed from the family following parental separation or prejudicial behaviors; or in the context of an adoption application, whereby the future parents must undergo a psychological evaluation to demonstrate their suitability for parenthood. An important tool for the assessment of parenting skills is the Parents Preference Test (PPT; Westh, 2003a, 2003b, 2006), which is a graphical test comprised of 24 easy to understand images of daily family life, aimed at assessing a couple's parenting skills. Each item consists of five pictures: one picture shows a typical parent-child interaction and, from the remaining four images, "parents must select the picture that best represents their typical behavior in the stimulus situation" (Hartmann et al., 2011, p. 6). The test uses four dimensions to evaluate parenthood: energy, focus of attention, experiential modality, and regulation style. Although the PPT is one of the most widely used instruments in parental skills assessment, it lacks empirical evidences in forensic assessment and does not provide a control scale to contribute to measuring participants' attitudes (i.e., response styles) and approaches to the test; this is an important oversight, considering the high tendency of child custody litigants to show faking-good parenting behaviors. According to the Specialty guidelines for forensic psychology (APA, 2013), the absence of such a measure prevents the PPT from being used in the forensic context.

Given the widespread use of the PPT and the tendency for participants to present themselves in a favorable light characterized by good adaptation, two studies were carried out with the following aims:

Study 1: To compare the distribution of PPT response frequencies of parents undergoing a psychological evaluation of personality and parenting ability with that of a normative/control group of caregivers. We hypothesized that parents involved in child custody disputes chose dynamic and centered on child's activity alternatives in PPT vignettes compared to parents belong to a normative/control sample.

Study 2: To compile a "Conforming Parenting Index" and assess its accuracy in discriminating participants who have been instructed to present themselves as good parents.

Study 1

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

The sample was comprised of two groups of parents, with a total of 209 participants aged 24–60 years. Specifically, between January–December 2018, we recruited 110 parents from schools and child recreation centers ($N_{male} = 52$; $N_{female} = 58$). Parents were aged 24–59 years ($M = 40.16$; $SD = 6.6$) and had an average of 14.48 ($SD = 3.2$) years of education. These caregivers comprised the normative/control group. For the second group, we recruited 99 parents ($N_{male} = 47$; $N_{female} = 52$) undergoing a psychological evaluation of personality and parenting ability, as prescribed by judges in the context of a child custody dispute. These parents comprised the forensic group ($M_{age} = 42.31[7.8]$; $M_{education} = 13.48 [3.9]$). Approximately 10% of the parents asked to participate completed the PPT but did not give informed consent. All cases were court ordered and data were only collected from child custody disputes; no data were collected from other child protection matters, as the literature suggests that there is a difference between judicial contexts (Resendes & Lecci, 2012). All participants had children aged 0–11 years. No statistically significant differences were observed between genders in age or years of education. The study was carried out with written informed consent by all participants, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. It was approved by the local ethics committee (Board of the Department of Human Neuroscience, Faculty of Medicine and Dentistry, Sapienza University of Rome).

2.2 Materials

2.2.1 Parents Preference Test (PPT). The full Italian version of the PPT (Baiocco et al., 2008) was used. The PPT (Westh, 2003a, 2003b, 2006) is a graphical test comprised of 24 easy to understand images of daily family life, aimed at assessing parenting skills in a couple. Each item consists of five pictures: one stimulus picture shows a typical parent–child interaction and, from the remaining four images, “parents must select the picture that best represents their typical behavior in the stimulus situation” (Hartmann et al., 2011, p. 6). The author of the PPT used the test to operationalize a clinical–theoretical hypothesis concerning the applicability of Millon’s four-dimensional General Model of Personality (Ferrer, 2006; Millon, 1969, 1990; Millon & Davis, 1996; Millon et al., 1996) to the field of parenting; in this way, the PPT describes parenting styles, as represented as parents’ internal representations of their preferred ways of interacting with their child. The test uses four dimensions to evaluate parenthood. The energy dimension is present in all items and describes whether the parents are mainly active (take initiative) or passive (more hesitant and receptive) during interactions with the child. The focus

of attention dimension investigates whether the parents' attention is mostly directed towards themselves (autoptic) or the child (paedoptic) during interactions. The experiential modality dimension describes whether the parents are emotionally or rationally oriented in their experience of the child; for instance, parents' ways of perceiving and understanding the child and interaction with him or her could be predominantly emotional or, on the contrary, analytic and logical. Finally, the regulation style dimension determines whether the parents are mostly rule-oriented (preceptual), regulating their child's behavior on the basis of pre-established rules applied to each context, or situation-oriented (contextual), regulating their child's behavior by evaluating each specific situation. The four test dimensions show correlation coefficients (Pearson's r) ranging from .80 (regulation style) to .84 (focus of attention and energy). In the present study, administration of the PPT lasted approximately 30–40 minutes with each caregiver.

2.2.2 Procedure

From January to December 2018, we administered the Italian version of the PPT according to the standard instructions (Baiocco et al., 2008) to the normative/control group. The forensic sample was collected between 2017–2018 from five regional courts throughout Italy, with collaboration from local psychologists who had been called to evaluate parents and administer the PPT during assessments of parental fitness.

2.2.3 Statistical Analysis

A cross-sectional design was implemented. A non-parametric chi-square test for goodness of fit was used to compare the distribution of answer frequencies between the forensic and normative/control groups. For each test, the statistical significance level was set at .01. Based on the significant results, we identified the alternative (of the four) chosen with the highest frequency in the forensic group. For this analysis, the SPSS-25 statistical package (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) was used.

3. Results

First, we inspected the frequencies of each answer choice in the normative/control group ($N = 110$). Based on these observed frequencies, we computed the expected frequencies in the forensic group and inspected the differences between groups. In 11 (out of 24) vignettes, there were significant differences in the frequencies with which particular answers were chosen between groups. In more detail, significant differences were found in vignettes 1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 19, 20, and 21 (see Table 1). For vignette 12, it was not possible to calculate the Chi-

square because, in the forensic group, no participant chose alternative 2. The same limitation also applied to vignette 17, in which no participant chose alternative 2; and vignette 22, in which no forensic participant chose alternative 4. In the 11 vignettes demonstrating significantly different answering profiles between groups, we identified the alternative that was chosen with the highest frequency in the forensic group (see Table 2).

Table 1. Chi-square goodness of fit

Vignette	Normative sample	Forensic sample		χ^2	<i>p</i>
	(<i>N</i> = 110) <i>f</i> _{observed}	(<i>N</i> = 99) <i>f</i> _{observed}	<i>f</i> _{expected}		
1				20.053	<.001
	Alternative 1	49	43	44	
	Alternative 2	24	32	22	
	Alternative 3	19	2	17	
	Alternative 4	18	22	16	
2				21.801	<.001
	Alternative 1	13	3	11.9	
	Alternative 2	13	6	11.9	
	Alternative 3	22	12	19.8	
	Alternative 4	62	78	55.4	
3				7.703	.053
	Alternative 1	18	7	16.2	
	Alternative 2	15	18	13.2	
	Alternative 3	42	38	38.4	
	Alternative 4	35	36	31.3	
4				14.467	.002
	Alternative 1	22	13	20	
	Alternative 2	25	13	22	
	Alternative 3	19	15	17	
	Alternative 4	44	58	40	
5				7.678	.053
	Alternative 1	19	9	17	
	Alternative 2	14	20	13	
	Alternative 3	38	33	34	
	Alternative 4	39	37	35	
6				7.870	.049
	Alternative 1	16	8	14.1	
	Alternative 2	11	8	10.1	
	Alternative 3	66	73	59.6	
	Alternative 4	17	10	15.2	
7				2.131	.546
	Alternative 1	19	19	17.2	
	Alternative 2	7	3	6.1	
	Alternative 3	59	52	53.5	
	Alternative 4	25	25	22.2	
8				19.870	<.001
	Alternative 1	31	47	28	
	Alternative 2	27	23	24	
	Alternative 3	10	5	9	
	Alternative 4	42	24	38	
9				20.696	<.001
	Alternative 1	17	3	15.2	
	Alternative 2	46	59	41.4	
	Alternative 3	30	29	27.3	
	Alternative 4	17	8	15.2	

10					15.027	.002
	Alternative 1	16	3	14		
	Alternative 2	19	11	17		
	Alternative 3	51	57	46		
	Alternative 4	24	28	22		
11					25.205	<.001
	Alternative 1	14	4	12.9		
	Alternative 2	39	47	34.7		
	Alternative 3	23	6	20.8		
	Alternative 4	34	42	30.7		
12					//	//
	Alternative 1	27	28	24		
	Alternative 2	16		14		
	Alternative 3	22	40	20		
	Alternative 4	45	31	40		
13					1.835	.607
	Alternative 1	12	9	11		
	Alternative 2	45	46	40		
	Alternative 3	31	24	28		
	Alternative 4	22	20	20		
14					3.234	.357
	Alternative 1	25	27	22.2		
	Alternative 2	26	26	23.2		
	Alternative 3	31	21	28.3		
	Alternative 4	28	25	25.3		
15					21.745	<.001
	Alternative 1	13	6	11.9		
	Alternative 2	13	2	11.9		
	Alternative 3	29	20	25.7		
	Alternative 4	55	71	49.5		
16					8.045	.045
	Alternative 1	16	24	14.1		
	Alternative 2	26	20	23.2		
	Alternative 3	29	23	26.3		
	Alternative 4	39	32	35.4		
17					//	//
	Alternative 1	32	43	29		
	Alternative 2	10		9		
	Alternative 3	19	6	17		
	Alternative 4	49	50	44		
18					4.869	.182
	Alternative 1	8	11	7		
	Alternative 2	45	35	40		
	Alternative 3	44	45	40		
	Alternative 4	13	8	12		
19					64.810	<.001
	Alternative 1	20	16	22.6		
	Alternative 2	25	19	3.8		
	Alternative 3	45	43	50.1		
	Alternative 4	20	21	22.6		
20					20.326	<.001
	Alternative 1	34	20	31		
	Alternative 2	25	17	22		
	Alternative 3	14	8	13		
	Alternative 4	37	54	33		
21					17.216	.001
	Alternative 1	10	19	9.1		
	Alternative 2	57	50	51.5		
	Alternative 3	15	4	13.1		
	Alternative 4	28	26	25.3		

22					//	//
	Alternative 1	22	21	20		
	Alternative 2	38	37	34		
	Alternative 3	37	41	33		
	Alternative 4	13		12		
23					3.194	.363
	Alternative 1	19	13	17.2		
	Alternative 2	17	11	15.2		
	Alternative 3	48	49	43.4		
	Alternative 4	26	26	23.2		
24					4.526	.210
	Alternative 1	42	47	38		
	Alternative 2	12	9	11		
	Alternative 3	15	8	13		
	Alternative 4	41	35	37		

Note. We considered $p \leq .01$.

Table 2. Frequencies (%) of the alternative more chosen in 11 vignettes with a significant different distribution of preference in forensic sample

Vignette	Alternative	%	Dimension
1	1	43.4	Focus of Attention
2	4	78.8	Regulation Style/Energy
4	4	58.6	Focus of Attention/Energy
6	3	73.7	Experiential Modality/Energy
8	1	47.5	Focus of Attention/Energy
9	2	59.6	Experiential Modality/Energy
10	3	57.6	Regulation Style/Energy
11	2	47.5	Experiential Modality/Energy
15	4	71.7	Regulation Style
16	4	32.3	Experiential Modality
19	3	43.4	Experiential Modality/Energy
20	4	54.5	Experiential Modality/Energy
21	2	50.5	Regulation Style

4. Discussion

A major area of interest for practitioners and researchers in the forensic context is the assessment of parenting skills, and a leading instrument used for this evaluation is the PPT (Westh, 2003a, 2003b, 2006). In the child custody setting, it is not uncommon for litigants to present themselves in an especially favorable light (Mazza et al., 2019; Roma et al., 2014); for this reason, the Specialty Guidelines for Forensic Psychology (APA, 2013) recommend that the parental assessment tool should include scales dedicated to detecting faking-good parenting behaviors. Although the PPT is widely used in forensic settings, it lacks validity scales to detect participants' attitudes toward the test. Furthermore, to date, no studies with specific populations have been conducted. The main aim of the present study was to identify possible differences between normative/control and forensic samples in the distribution of their responses on the PPT.

The results of Study 1 confirmed our hypothesis, highlighting a significant difference in the distribution of responses between samples; in particular, 11 vignettes (1, 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 19, 20, and 21) out of 24 showed significantly different answering profiles. In more detail, significant differences were found on the following dimensions: focus of attention (vignettes 1, 4, and 8), which describes the focus of parents' attention during interaction with the child and how much attention is directed towards the child and his or her needs; regulation style (vignettes 10, 15, and 21), which refers to parents' ability to regulate their child's behavior, in relation to the specific situation and their idea of right/wrong or in relation to a set of previously acquired rules; experiential modality (vignettes 9, 11, 19, and 20), which investigates whether parents, in their experience of their child's situation and needs, focus more on emotional or rational aspects; and energy (vignettes 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 19, and 20), which examines whether parents are more active or passive in their interaction with the child.

We also inspected the forensic sample's most frequently chosen alternatives in the aforementioned 11 vignettes. Here, it was possible to detect some peculiarities. Regarding focus of attention, parents in this group preferred alternatives that presented themselves as exclusively centered on the child and ready to "be with" the child in the interaction. The regulation style results were predominantly rule-dependent, meaning that parents, regardless of the situation, tended to present a normative style. Regarding the experiential modality, parents in the forensic group demonstrated a preference to address children's intentions, needs, and initiatives through an emotional lens. Lastly, the energy dimension indicated that parents were willing to be active protagonists and to take initiative in interactions with their child. The forensic group seemed to prefer this active dimension in line with the common belief that a parent should be dynamic and centered on their child's activity. This finding supports the results of studies on social desirability that have shown that parents are motivated to support qualities and behaviors that are generally considered to reflect "good parenting," such as giving praise or affection to their child (Sessa et al., 2001). On the contrary, parents have been shown to less frequently admit to passive responses, even though this parenting dimension may allow more space for a child to develop initiative and autonomy (Hartmann et al., 2011).

Interestingly (at a psychological level), in the forensic group, no participant demonstrated a focus of attention on the self in items 12, 17, and 22; instead, all participants chose the alternative demonstrating a focus of attention on the child. Here, too, it is possible to trace a naive assumption of "good parenting" that sees a good parent as dedicated to devoting attention and energy to the child at the sacrifice of personal space.

Study 2

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Participants

The experimental sample was comprised of 58 parents ($N_{male} = 29$; $N_{female} = 29$) aged 29–60 years ($M = 41.33$; $SD = 5.4$), with an average of 14 ($SD = 2.9$) years of education. All participants participated voluntarily in the study and were recruited between January–December 2018 from schools and child recreation centers.

2.2 Materials

We administered the Italian version of the PPT (Baiocco et al., 2008).

2.3 Procedure

The study demonstrated a within participant design in order to limit confounding variables (e.g., personality traits, cognitive abilities). In more detail, we asked participants to first complete the test honestly (1a) according to the standard instructions in the Italian technical manual (Baiocco et al., 2008) and, subsequently, to complete the test showing faking-good parenting behaviors (1b). The instructions given were:

1a) *In a few moments I will show you 24 images that represent scenes of family life. For each of these I will present you with four smaller images from which you will have to choose, case by case, the one that best describes how you would behave as a parent in a similar situation. Don't worry, there are no right or wrong answers. We just want to have your opinion. This drawing represents a typical family life scene. Look carefully at the image: what do you think is happening on this board?*

1b) *In a few moments I will show you 24 images that represent typical scenes of family life. For each of these, I will present you with 4 smaller images from which you will have to choose, case by case, the one that best describes the behavior of a model parent. I therefore ask you to respond to this test by keeping these instructions in mind until the end of the test.*

The duration of the test administration was approximately 30–50 minutes.

2.4 Statistical Analyses

Starting from the results of Study 1, we compared the most frequently chosen alternative in the 11 vignettes that showed significantly different responses between the normative/control and forensic groups with the alternative that was most frequently chosen by each parent in the experimental group. If the alternative was the same, we attributed a point of 1 (positive); if the alternative was different, we attributed a point of 0 (negative). The sum of these points comprised an index called the “Conforming Parenting Index” (CPI). A ROC analysis was

performed on the CPI score, and the AUC was examined to identify the best cut-off CPI score. To interpret the AUC value, we used the Swets (1998) classification. The SPSS-25 statistical package (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL) was also used for all analyses.

3. Results

The most frequently chosen alternatives by the forensic group were compiled into the CPI. To compute the CPI score in the experimental group, we assigned a score of 1 when a participant chose exactly the same alternative as the most frequently preferred alternative in the forensic sample; otherwise we gave a score of 0 (e.g., if a parent in the experimental group chose alternative 1 in vignette 1, we attributed a score of 1; otherwise, we attributed a score of 0). We then summed the scores to obtain the overall CPI score for each participant.

The CPI score showed an AUC value of .813 ($SE = .039$) with $p < .001$. Using the Swets (1998) classification, we found the CPI to be considerably moderately accurate in its detection of caregivers who had completed the test under faking-good instructions (see Figure 1). The best cut-off, identified by the Youden test (1950), corresponded to 5.5. This threshold maximized the difference between true positives (sensitivity) and false positives (specificity) (see Table 3). We also inspected the percentage of participants with $CPI \geq 6$ in both the normative/control and the forensic group in Study 1. In the normative/control group, the percentage of participants with $CPI \geq 6$ was 35.3% with an average of 4.69 ($SD = 2.2$); in the forensic group, the comparable percentage was 62.7% ($M_{CPI} = 6.13$; $SD_{CPI} = 1.9$).

Figure 1. Graphical Representation of the CPI ROC curve

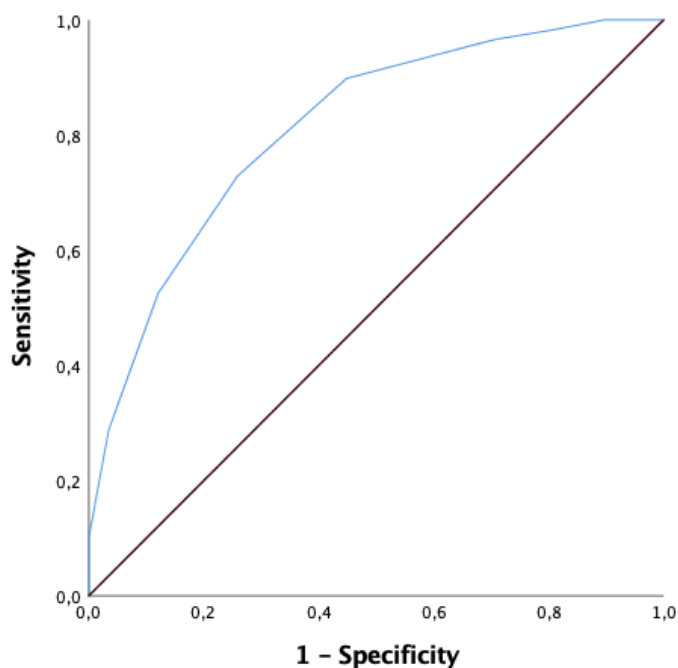


Table 3. Coordinates of the CPI ROC curve

Positive if \geq	Sensitivity	1-Specificity	Youden's index
0.50	1.000	.983	0.017
1.50	1.000	.897	0.103
2.50	.983	.810	0.173
3.50	.966	.707	0.259
4.50	.898	.448	0.45
5.50	.729	.259	0.47
6.50	.525	.121	0.404
7.50	.288	.034	0.254
8.50	.102	.000	0.102
9.50	.034	.000	0.034

4. Discussion

Drawing from the findings of Study 1 the main aim of Study 2 was to develop an index (the CPI) that would be capable of detecting faking-good parenting behaviors during administration of the PPT in a child custody hearing. The study was carried out on an experimental sample that was asked to first respond honestly, according to the standard instructions of the technical manual, and then to subsequently respond showing social desirability caregiving behaviors. The preliminary results show that the CPI was accurate in detecting parents who had completed the test by referring to behaviors that were likely to reflect good caregiving, in line with a normative prototype of socially desirable parenthood. This finding is in line with the results of previous studies that have emphasized that child custody litigants tend to deny or omit negative features of their personality in order to present themselves in a better light, to show more adaptive psychological and behavioral functioning, and to appear as responsible caregivers who will provide for the best interests of their child (Archer et al., 2012; Bagby et al., 1999; Bathurst et al., 1997; Kauffman et al., 2015; Sellbom & Bagby, 2008). This underreporting attempt could stem from a faking-good profile in the MMPI-2 (Roma et al., 2014; Roma, Piccinni, & Ferracuti, 2016) and MMPI-2-RF (Mazza et al., 2019a), rendering many test protocols useless. The underreporting attitude found in caregivers undergoing a parenting evaluation is also comparable to the results of studies of using the MMPI-2-RF and MMPI-2 in a forensic setting with participants who have driven under the influence of alcohol (Roma, et al., 2019a), as well as studies on faking-good behaviors (Mazza, et al., 2019a, 2019b; Roma, et al., 2018, 2019a, 2019b). Overall, there is a need for new and promising methods and strategies to mainstream and administer tests more effectively, first with a control measure (i.e., a validity scale), and second drawing on, for instance, reaction time, machine learning, and mouse tracking (Mazza, et al., 2019b; Monaro et al., 2017; Roma, et al., 2018). Finally, it is interesting to consider how our expectations were met, considering that the CPI was positive in the forensic sample but negative in the normative/control group.

5. Conclusion

Faking-good behavior is widespread, especially in scenarios in which subjects are motivated to present themselves in a positive light (Roma et al., 2019b; Mazza et al., 2019a). In particular, in the forensic setting, it has been shown that 20–74% of child custody litigants tend to falsely present a more positive impression of themselves (Baer & Miller, 2002). The main measures used to detect fakers by assessing the presence of responding biases are the validity scales of personality questionnaires (Paulhus, 2002; Roma, Giromini, Burla, Ferracuti, Viglione, & Mazza, in press); however, on the whole, faking-good behavior remains underinvestigated (Crighton et al., 2017).

In this preliminary research, we used the PPT to detect differences in the frequencies of particular responses between normative/control and forensic groups and to develop a new index, the CPI, to detect faking-good parenting behaviors. The results showed significant differences in the following dimensions: focus of attention, regulation style, and experiential modality. In more detail, the findings highlight that parents in the forensic group tended to present a focus on the child, a normative style, and a predominantly emotional response to their child's needs. Finally, the forensic parents presented an active protagonist style, demonstrating greater initiative in their relationship with their child (energy dimension). The CPI demonstrated good accuracy in classifying caregivers who had been instructed to respond to the PPT in a fake-good way, in line with a socially desirable prototype of good parenthood.

This preliminary study entails certain limitations that should be borne in mind when generalizing the results. First, the positive distortion could be related to self-deception and positive impression management, which are considered unconscious and conscious phenomena (Settineri et al., 2018), respectively (Paulhus, 1984). Second, the results could relate to the demands of the situation or reflect characteristic traits of the forensic population (Carr et al., 2005). Lastly, we did not consider gender differences and socio-economic status, and either or both of these factors may have affected meaningful differences in the parent reports, relative to observational measures (Herbers et al., 2017).

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