'Intensive parenting'
Ellie Lee (presentation for 'Kick Off' 'Parental Cultures and risk management in plural Norway', Uni Research Rokkansenteret Bergen, 26th and 27th November 2014.

The aim of this paper is to discuss some of the ideas and approaches that have influenced the work of those involved in the Centre for Parenting Culture Studies, and which are also set out in our book, *Parenting Culture Studies* (Lee et al 2014). This work began as an effort to find ways of making sense of the findings of research about feeding babies. A decade ago, my work at the time was focussed on researching the experiences of women who for one reason or another fed their babies formula milk in the early weeks following birth. I met Charlotte Faircloth at the time, who was then beginning her PhD research about attachment parenting, focussing centrally on breastfeeding experiences of the mothers she worked with. A shared phenomenon our work seemed to point to was that an aspect of motherhood than can be thought of as both practical (it is about feeding a baby) and personal (it concerns an individual mother, doing what makes sense in her life as she cares for her baby) had become complicated and moralised. Our culture seemed to be working in a way that had constructed the act of feeding a baby as something more than and different to what it might appear to be (that is, feeding a baby).

The term 'parenting *culture'* and the proposition that the study of its workings would be a worthwhile project, developed from this starting point, and we have identified the following as central features of this culture presently:

- It is built on the construction of child rearing as both more important and more problematic than has been previously recognised;
- It entails a supposition of a deficit or deficiency in what is being done by parents: parenting is not a neutral term but brings with it the presumption that something must be done about what parents are doing;
- This way of thinking brings with it the development of more or less explicit rules for parenting, and the development of cultural scripts that shape the identity and identity-work of mothers and fathers.

To discuss further how we have come to this view, I will now briefly outline what we have taken from Sharon Hays' (1996) work (this is where the term 'intensive' comes from) and secondly make a few comments on the 'rules'.

Sharon Hays: *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*

Sharon Hays' 1996 publication, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood is* a seminal text we have drawn upon in developing the study of parenting culture. Although the book is now almost 20 years old, it still stands as a hugely engaging and important work. Its strength lies in part in its methodology, which combines an assessment of contemporary experience, with a highly historicised account of the ideology of motherhood in the US. As such, Hays' work both identifies what is specific about present, and also shows how contemporary norms for mothering relate to wider social organisation and historical development. The emphasis is, on this basis, on 'cultural contradiction', with the work pointing to tensions in the way society works that need to be recognised and addressed.

The historical account begins with the child, and the observation that childhood is a social construction, out of which norms regarding parenting and what is appropriate arise. Hays, through her account of the history of 'intensive mothering', shows how the basis for the significance attached to mothering is given by the separation of the child (and so the family) from wider economic and community life (the separation of spheres), and the way that demands are then made on the apparently 'private' family, in regards to the socialisation of children. The 'intensification' of motherhood, that is the making of particular demands on the mother as the socialiser of the next generation, develops as a result. What mothers and fathers do becomes subject of concern, and attended by efforts to shape and modify their practices and attitudes.

Her account is very attentive to shifts in perceptions of what the 'problem' of childhood is, what the mother needs to do and is doing wrong. For example, she draws attention to discursive shifts in the messages associated with the scientific motherhood of the early 20th Century (and its emphasis on 'child training'), to those of the more recent period:

> [T]hroughout the 19th and early 20th centuries the explicit goals of child rearing were centred on the good of the family and the good of the nation; the emphasis was on the importance of imprinting adult sensibilities on children from the moment of birth…By contrast the most striking feature of the permissive-era advice is the idea that….the fulfilment of children's desires are ends in themselves….With this, the conception of a child-centred family takes on a new meaning. Not only is home centred on children, but child-rearing is guided by them. *The child (whose needs are interpreted by experts) is now to train the parent.* (Hays 1996, p45, my empahsis)

This development of 'child-centredness' (also termed 'socialisation in reverse') for Hays underlies the 'intensification of parenting'. It is at the core of her argument about what 'intensive motherhood' is. It is a cultural form in which adults (mothers especially) are expected to be guided in their actions by the 'needs of the child', as defined by 'child experts'. The cultural norm that arises as to what motherhood should be like, on the basis of this construction, contains three main features:

- It is labour intensive (it take up a great deal of mothers' time);
- There is the expectation that mothers find child-centered motherhood emotionally rewarding;
- It is financially expensive.

In regards to what this leads to for the experience of motherhood, it is one of being pulled in two contradictory directions – as the adult, and as mother. It is this experience (also called the problem of 'work-life balance') that Hays' research documents so well.

Key themes we have taken from this work, and sought to develop further are first, the importance of making the starting point investigation of the meaning given to childhood, and second the tendency Hays' work suggest for childrearing to become simultaneously *more privatised* (more and more is thrown back onto the mother and the family) and *less private* (subject to more or less overt scrutiny by experts).

<u>Rules for Parenting</u>

Less addressed by Hays, but centrally important for the study of parenting culture, are two related developments.

1. The emergence of regulatory systems based on the intensification of parenting and the redefinition of institutions around intensive parenting, bringing greater monitoring and policing of parents as a result.
2. A simultaneous process of de-authorisation of adults *in general*, leading to the distancing of children from not only their parents, but also adults more generally

Regulatory systems

There are interesting points made about the relation between intensive parenting and regulation in the paper 'Over-Parenting' (Bernstein and Triger, 2011). They consider developments in various areas of law focussing on the US, and draw out how the precepts of intensive parenting work and push things in problematic directions. They consider a set of examples – divorce proceedings, child custody, parental immunity cases, lead poisoning, drinking in pregnancy and obese children. In all these cases they indicate that the standard or presumption about what a parent should be like given by the model of intensive parenting is at work.

It is not possible to talk about all these (and other) examples of how regulation comes to work here, but I will draw attention to what they highlight about education as containing interesting and important observations. They argue first that:

> During the kindergarten years and school years, parents regularly participate in an increasing number of school activities. In a sense, conventional teaching is progressively outsourced and parents find themselves sharing in and performing tasks that were traditionally the teachers' responsibility (p.1233).

This expansion of childrearing and the tasks associated with it, secondly, brings regulatory effects both ways. One the one hand, parents bring the law to school:

> Parental involvement in their children's school activities coexists with a decline in teachers' authority over children during school time. Parents have become increasingly involved in activities and decisions that were previously within teachers' absolute discretion and control. For example, teachers require parents actively to participate in their children's homework, through questions specifically targeted at parents. In addition, parents are increasingly involved in school governance and decision-making regarding curricular and extra-curricular activities. Some commentators attribute the decline in teachers' authority to the increase in lawsuits by parents against schools and educators for a broad range of injuries experienced by their children (p.1234).

Intensive Parenting in this way leads to the de-authorisation of the teacher. On the other, education authorities bring the law into the home. As parents are increasingly seen as responsible for their children's education, we now have criminal sanctions where children skip school, fines where they miss days for holidays, and even proposals that some form of action should be taken when parents do not read with their children. For example, a recent policy document in England states that 4 in 10 parents are inadequate and that they should be obliged to attend parenting classes where 'educators' believe they are not contributing to their children's education sufficiently (Lee, 2014).

Second, Bernstein and Triger make a case about the general problem of regulation developing on this basis, because of its consequences for different sections of society and different families. Particular families or groups come to be potential or actual subjects of punitive action, they argue, because their approach to parenting is not / is not insufficiently intensive. On ethnicity, they thus suggest:

> Parenting is a social construct created by social and cultural contexts and norms. In a multicultural country such as the United States, the absorption into law of the current trend of Intensive Parenting might prove intolerant of the coexisting diverse child rearing methods….among European-Americans [for example] leaving children alone even for a short period of time may appear as neglect. (p.1268)

And on class:

> While it is mainly middle-class parents who practise Intensive Parenting, parents of working and poor classes utilize a strikingly different form of child rearing….The child spends a significant amount of time enaging in free play with kin…..[Additionally] Intensive Parenting is often unfeasible for working class and poor parents whose resources are limited…While members of lower socio-economic classes may not desire to endorse the values of Intensive Parenting and cannot afford its practices, the law ….is already compelling them to abide by the standards of Intensive Parenting. (Example given is child custody, but others spring to mind, including child protection cases). (p. 1269-70)

The outcome is that the lives of all parents become less private, but this is the case especially and most directly for some parents.

Risk and the problem of authority

The second aspect of regulation is to do with the way it increasingly works to continually re-enforce privatisation, and this is because it is not only the authority of the parent that is called into question, but increasingly that of adults in general. It is relation to this aspect of things that the concept 'risk' becomes centrally important to the study of parenting culture, because of the recognition this allows of the way that the construction of childhood has proceeded in a particular direction, at least in the US and the UK. This is to a definition of childhood as a state of vulnerability or of being 'at risk'. This has directly added to the intensification of parenting in that the attention the parent must pay to keep the child safe has increased considerably (called 'cotton-wooling'). Further, this problem is added to as

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other adults – who might otherwise be looked to as collaborators in child rearing – come instead to be presented as a danger to the child.

This is probably the most important development of risk consciousness leading to a speedy redefinition of what is meant by 'child protection' and 'child welfare' as an enterprise from which most adults are necessarily excluded, unless they attain professional accreditation. This is central to the problem of childrearing as it pertains now in UK and US. The paper by Nicole Hennum (2014), 'Developing Child Centred Social Policies: When Professionalism takes over' seems to point to the advance of similar trends in Norway, and this maybe something we can discuss as part of the work of this project.

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