

## **Meeting the challenges of intensive parenting culture: gender, risk management and the moral parent.**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, academics have shown interest in the phenomenon of intensive parenting, which has predominantly focussed on mothers as primary caregivers. In this paper we seek to move beyond approaches which invoke a maternal lens in order to consider fathers' experience of intensive parenting in relation to their lives with partners. Drawing on data from a qualitative longitudinal study of men over the transition to fatherhood we explore men's experiences of the benefits and challenges of an intensive parenting approach. Despite increased involvement in childcare, men appear to be relatively insulated against the demands of intensive parenting, describing the importance of autonomous decision-making over following expert advice. However, this paper considers the way in which other aspects of contemporary parenting may be experienced more intensively by men, pointing to gender differentiation in risks related to a moral parenthood identity.

Keywords: Intensive parenting, fathering, risk, gender, interpretive analysis

### **Introduction**

In recent years, academics have shown interest in the phenomenon of intensive or hyper-parenting (Hoffman, 2010); a highly demanding, child-centred approach to childrearing, which is both a time and emotionally intensive enterprise (Lee *et al.*, 2010). The term 'intensive mothering' was originally adopted by Hays (1996:x) to describe a (gendered) model of parenting "*that advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children.*" Such an approach means that parents are "*expected to acquire detailed knowledge of what the experts consider proper child development and then spend a good deal of time and money attempting to foster it*" (Hays, 1996:8).

Intensive parenting, and the increased pressures of parental responsibility it brings about, can be viewed as part of the broader neoliberal project (Henwood *et al.*, 2010). Over the last few decades, neoliberalism has acquired the status of a ‘grand narrative’ upheld by both Conservative and New Labour philosophy (Phoenix, 2004), which emphasises individual responsibility and self-management alongside a focus on managing risk. Intensive parenting ideology can be seen as entwined with neoliberalism; underlining future success through planning and control of the many aspects of one’s life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Parents are increasingly held responsible for risk management and life planning, as ‘bad parenting’ is thought to lead to numerous social ills; ranging from poor educational and developmental outcomes to criminality (Hoffman, 2010). The process of ‘making’ the child through ‘concerted cultivation’ (Vincent and Ball, 2007) offers a way of managing risk through attentive parenting. Consequently there is an assumption that parents (particularly mothers) have the ability to control and shape the lives of children (Wall, 2010), ensuring children are turned into responsible citizens (Lister, 2006). The social standing of parents can be seen as contingent on child accomplishments and intelligence, as well as the parental effort put into achieving this, placing parents into competition with one another in achieving desirable child outcomes (Wall, 2010). As a strategy to alleviate the potential risks of poor parenting, investing in an intensive approach can prove appealing, as Wall (2010:258) notes:

‘The idea that children’s outcomes are almost completely under parental control is a seductive one. It holds out a guarantee of future happiness and success if parents have the time, resources and knowledge to make the correct inputs.’

However, within intensive parenting culture parents are seen as inadequate risk-managers (Lee *et al.*, 2010) and are encouraged to rely on expert guidance. Critics have argued that this undermines parental confidence, placing undue pressure on parents, who are positioned as ultimately responsible for but incapable of ensuring their child’s optimal development (Hays, 1996; Fox, 2009). Therefore parenting becomes a source of risk and anxiety as what happens is viewed as the product of individual, autonomous choices (Phoenix, 2004).

Though more recently framed through the gender-neutral term ‘parenting’, discussions of intensity have predominantly focussed on mothers, based on the assumption that they will be responsible for the majority of primary care and therefore have greater responsibility for ensuring their child’s adequate development (Lister, 2006; Wall, 2010). However, with increasing father involvement in childcare (Sullivan, 2010) it is prudent to consider the extent to which the demands of intensity extend to men. Dermott (2009, 2008) has explored this issue, suggesting that contemporary fatherhood is intimate rather than intensive, given fathers’ prioritisation of forming an emotional relationship with the child over the quantity of time spent with them. Such findings have led to the conclusion that parenting is less intensive for men than for women (Hays, 1996; Dermott, 2009). However, when exploring fathering during the economic downturn, we noted that ‘*men also feel pressured to adhere to certain standards in order to demonstrate they were providing the best start for their child, which often involved significant financial resources.*’ (Henwood *et al.*, 2010:145), suggesting that there are occasions when men experience an intensification of demands in relation to parenting. Approaching fatherhood via a maternal lens (Doucet, 2007) in reproducing the understanding of mothering as primary parenting is potentially problematic and may mean that men’s different experiences of intensity are overlooked. In this paper we seek to move beyond such approaches in order to explore how men and women attempt to meet the demands of intensity at a time when issues of gender inequality in their relationships can become particularly prominent (Fox, 2009).

Previous research has pointed to the continuing salience of the provider/breadwinner identity for men (Townsend, 2002) as one aspect of fatherhood which shows intergenerational continuity (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006) and continues to be underlined by current policy (J. Lewis, 2002). Therefore, despite the turn to models of paternal involvement as a culturally potent ideal, it is often observed that men’s contribution to domestic life remains far more optional than women’s (Woolett and Nicolson, 1998), and that their work identity continues to be stronger than their identity as fathers of children (see Townsend, 2002, for discussion). However, such criticism of men’s lesser involvement in childcare overlooks the way in which work is not necessarily a separation from family but can be seen as a manifestation of family commitment (Townsend, 2002) or ‘project of the family’ (Ranson, 2001).

Furthermore, notions of providing extend beyond the financial and include men's view of themselves as facilitating choice and agency in order to ensure long-term success and wellbeing for their children (Owen *et al.*, 2010). Intensive parenting is seen to reflect middle-class values (Klett-Davies, 2010) and the underlying emphasis on 'concerted cultivation' is arguably made possible through the resources (both financial and in relation to social and cultural capital) that come with higher levels of education and income (Wall, 2010; Fox, 2009). Previous analysis has highlighted how men can feel a considerable obligation to provide (Townsend, 2002), whilst concerns about financial provision appear to be much less pronounced in women's accounts (Thomson *et al.*, forthcoming). Therefore the resources needed for intensive parenting can be seen as creating particular risks for men in relation to employment and finances (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002). In this paper we consider how hands-on caring and providing hold different implications for men and women's moral parenting identities. By describing men and women's relationships to the different work of earning and caring we do not wish to reproduce traditional gender dichotomies which reinforce these divisions. The men in our sample were all involved in hands-on care, whilst their female partners all made an economic contribution to family life, thus it would be inaccurate to term men earners and women carers. However, by exploring this issue we are able to elucidate the way in which these traditional gendered expectations continue to hold implications for moral parenting identities, and the relative resources men and women have to manage this on occasions when parenting can become 'risky'.

In existing studies, the negative connotations of an intensive parenting culture have been emphasised; suggesting that it is creating a generation of 'paranoid parents' (Furedi, 2001). However, this pressure does not affect all parents in the same way, as whilst intensive parenthood may be the dominant cultural ideology, there is wide variation in how parents react to and follow its prescriptions. For example, of the thirty six women interviewed by Fox (2009) who agreed with the tenets of intensive mothering, only eight adopted very intensive mothering practices. In this paper we consider men's reflexive awareness of intensive parenting culture as they describe accepting or rejecting different aspects of this ideology in order to manage risk and position themselves as being good or moral parents.

## **The study**

Data for this paper come from one sample group participating in the Men as Fathers research project based at Cardiff University<sup>1</sup>, which forms part of the UK wide Timescapes network. This sample consisted of 16 men from the South Wales area aged 15 to 40 at the time of their child's birth. Participants were predominantly recruited through information provided at National Childbirth Trust classes, leaflets distributed at workplaces and public venues, and support agencies such as Surestart. A recruitment company was employed to increase sample variation in terms of participants' age, social and economic circumstances. 11 of the men in this sample were married, 3 cohabiting and 2 in a relationship but living separately. 10 were in professional occupations, 2 were manual workers, 3 were students and 1 was unemployed. Prior to the birth of their first child, both partners in 12 of the 15 couples worked full-time. 6 continued this pattern post-birth, whilst in 7 couples mothers returned to work part-time. The remaining couples had opted for part-time work or experienced unemployment. Participants in this sample were interviewed on three occasions; once before the birth of their child and twice within the first year afterwards.

Given the observation noted above that intensive parenting is seen to predominantly affect highly educated middle-class women, this paper focuses on the men whose partners fall into this category in order to consider the extent to which expectations for these parenting practices extend across the couple. In addition, research indicates that men with higher levels of educational attainment contribute a substantial amount more to childcare than men with lower educational attainment (Sullivan, 2010) and may be best placed to take action towards achievement of 'new' models of fathering (Dermott, 2008), which suggests they may be more likely to experience the demands of intensive parenting. Problems of attrition were greatest amongst younger and working-class fathers, reducing the comparable data for this group. However, their experiences are briefly introduced later in the paper as a point of comparison. Given the number of existing studies which have drawn links between intensive parenting and class (e.g. Vincent and Ball, 2007; Fox, 2009; Klett-Davies, 2010), we do not seek to foreground this issue here but focus instead on men's accounts of the gendered nature of intensive parenting.

Although based on a qualitative longitudinal (QLL) study, this paper does not foreground a QLL analysis but instead adopts a cross-sectional perspective in order to highlight the extent to which issues of intensive parenting are experienced across the sample. However, this analysis was made possible by the QLL design. Issues related to intensive parenting emerged serendipitously in participants' early accounts, which could then be followed up with more detailed questioning in the final interview. Drawing on extracts and comments from media and research articles, participants were asked about their own views on the idea that parenting is increasingly demanding and pressurised, and their use of various advice sources.

Interviews were semi-structured, informed by a social constructionist understanding which situates participants as meaning-makers (Warren, 2002) so that it becomes possible to investigate identities in-the-making (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). Data presented therefore highlight the men's interpretations of their experiences, reflecting an analytical approach grounded in participants' understandings. In our analysis we acknowledge that lives are lived interdependently and social and historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships (Roy, 2006). Therefore, in exploring issues of contemporary parenting we pay particular attention to men's experiences through a relational perspective on parenting (Doucet, 2007), to consider how mothers and fathers can influence and shape one another's parenting in ways that reinforce or unsettle established patterns of gender differentiated parenting.

### **Gender Differentiation and Moral Parenting Identities**

Intensive parenting has been seen as a gendered issue as women continue to hold primary responsibility for childcare. In this section of the paper, we consider men's experiences of these intensive parenting discourses in light of trends towards greater father involvement in hands-on childcare (Sullivan, 2010).

The current focus on parental determinism, which has been described as part of contemporary parenting culture (Vincent and Ball, 2007; Fox, 2009), was evident in the accounts of many men. Participants emphasised a belief in 'nurture over nature' and an awareness of how each decision they made would impact on their child in

some way, thus raising the pressure to make the right choices. This focus potentially positions parenting as risky, with reliance on expert guidance as a way of doing moral parenting work to avoid these risks. Participants recognised an increasing emphasis on expertise in relation to parenting but described gender differentiated responses to this. Most men had read information about pregnancy and childbirth in order to feel involved and be a useful support to their partner during this time. However, when asked one year later, the overwhelming majority of men suggested that they did not seek out advice about childcare, as the large amount of advice literature available meant information could be seen as unreliable or conflicting. This may reflect a context in which parents are encouraged to be hyper-cautious pre-birth, but criticised for being over-anxious if this continues postpartum (Lee *et al.*, 2010). In contrast to their own changing experience, most participants described their partners as continuing to seek a wealth of information from the internet or ‘expert’ guides (a practice also evident in research with mothers – Thomson *et al.*, forthcoming), which was seen by the men to create further anxieties.

‘Andrea uses netmums or something like that I think it’s called, I don’t, can’t be bothered ... I just don’t see that some idiot on the internet is necessarily gonna know anything that I don’t already know or is gonna tell me what’s correct anyway, so I’m very sceptical about such things, I don’t, I wouldn’t bother with them.’  
(Jeffrey, 40)

Men described themselves as more likely to question expert advice than their partners, often preferring to rely on ‘common sense’, thus representing a ‘counter discourse’ to the emphasis on professional expertise (Owen *et al.*, 2010).

‘I don’t tend to use the internet for advice ... it’s just I feel quite confident really that I can do the right thing for her, like I say try something and if it doesn’t work try something else, keep on trying until you get it right, that’s how you’re gonna learn.’ (Joe, 32)

‘I know my wife looks at an awful lot of things but it’s, I think common sense applies more than anything else ... My wife’s got a

number of, almost a veritable library of the usual ones; Gina Ford ... all that nonsense. And they all kind of give conflicting common sense information and you think at the end of the day just give him Calpol if he's uncomfortable or give him a hug if he's a bit emotional and that's kind of all you need to know isn't it?' (Marcus, 30)

Critics of intensive parenting culture suggest that a focus on expert intervention alongside cultural emphasis on parental determinism serves to undermine parents' confidence (C. Lewis, 2002), a concern highlighted by a senior politician's 'scathing attack' on childcare experts (The Sunday Times, January 2010). However, whilst men suggest their partners experience these anxieties and seek advice to alleviate this, such undermined confidence is not evident in their own accounts. One potential explanation for this is that whilst all mothers eventually returned to work, they spent several months on maternity leave where they had primary responsibility for hands-on care, meaning care work could become all-consuming for women in a way that it was not for men given their continuity of employment (Fox, 2009). It may also be that as this change is potentially more costly for women's careers, there is increased pressure to get it right, therefore positioning parenting as riskier for women, as Bradley suggests:

'There is pressure there, yeah ... I s'pose that's part of the thing like if a woman's saying she's taking a break from her career that she's gotta make sure she gets it right to make sure, to not end up resenting, saying "oh I could've been here in my career" or whatever.' (Bradley, 26)

Given this belief in parental determinism, alongside a lack of experience and confidence in parenting skills, it is unsurprising that women may adopt an intensive approach to parenting as a strategy to alleviate risk (Fox, 2009; Hoffman, 2010). By providing intensive care they can be seen as attempting to guard against undesirable future outcomes, upholding a moral maternal identity and ensuring time away from their careers can be seen as successful. The argument that the moral responsibility to care is stronger for women (Wetherell, 1997) is another way of accounting for their



greater anxieties. For example, Doucet (2007) suggests that worry is a vessel for holding onto the moral weight of raising children, finding that women in her study expressed worries about their influence on children and whether they were being ‘proper mothers’, concerns largely absent from the fathers’ accounts. This distinction was mirrored in our own research.

‘Yeah, on a day-to-day basis (2)<sup>ii</sup> she’s been coping absolutely fine other than just tiredness, but then she starts worrying about silly things, sometimes she’ll worry about what people will think about the clothes we’ve dressed Meg in and stuff. I’m a bit too “I don’t care” about this, like whether we have to dress her all in new clothes, I’m like “no we don’t” my sisters have given us a load of old clothes and there’s plenty of good stuff there and I don’t care if people think “oh she’s not wearing brand new clothes”. It’s not that Nicola’s worried about being judged on that particular thing but she’s much more worried about not doing enough for Meg basically, that’s what it boils down to.’ (Bradley, 26)

Comments like Bradley’s account of his partner suggest that women were acutely conscious of the way in which their performance as mothers was monitored (Bowcock, 2007). The men felt that it was difficult for their partners to admit any challenges they were experiencing to other mothers, which could lead to a silencing around difficult aspects of motherhood in relation to dominant cultural scripts (Miller, 2005).

‘I think there’s quite a lot of smoke and mirrors that goes on with some of Steph’s groups of friends ... Steph’s been beating herself up because Isaac doesn’t do this that and the other and I’ve just found out from the dad that Jacob’s actually considerably worse than Isaac is. I think maybe there is a bit of one-upmanship on that front with some of them.’ (Marcus, 30)

In contrast to accounts of their partner’s negative experiences, men described competitiveness with friends over their children’s development as being part of the

‘natural’, ‘healthy banter’ of fatherhood. Some suggested that this kind of competition even had a positive effect; by ensuring good standards of childcare were maintained.

‘I think there is pressure from each other to do it right, you know to have the right finger food at your party and things like that. But for you know a good way; everyone’s, not scrutinised but you know your friends are gonna have an opinion and you know what standard they’re setting. Although it’s not said and it’s not even unsaid, it’s just ... You all want to achieve the same goal, um to you know your kid going to college. You know everyone is talking about you know the college fund and things like that, that’s what people talk about, you know it is a point of conversation.’ (Kevin, 34)

Here Kevin indicates his reflexive awareness of parental competition, suggesting it is something he benefits from engaging with in maintaining a good standard of parenting. In this way, other parents are seen as supporting the future-oriented goal of producing a well-educated and socially responsible child. For many men, the emphasis on parental determinism appeared to contribute to the sense of self-fulfilment gained from fatherhood and the idea of good parenting as making an important social contribution (Wetherell, 1997), yet for some, this meant that parenthood was seen as a risky endeavour.

‘Oh God there’s huge risks; if you don’t do the job properly she could be tremendously unhappy, she could be in a horrendous situation, you know God only knows what could happen to her if we don’t do the right thing by her you know ... I mean I’m a firm believer in nurture rather than nature and ... I do think that parents have got to shoulder a great responsibility for what happens.’ (Alun, 34)

However, despite the related pressure a view of parental determinism could create, Alun was unusual in feeling that this positioned parenthood as risky. Alun was the only father to discuss current concerns about his child’s challenging behaviour, and a sense of his own inability to change this. Consequently, the ‘risks’ of parenting – feeling unable to influence the child’s behaviour but still being held responsible for it

– may have been highlighted to him in a way not experienced by other participants. This is one potential explanation for his greater level of concern about the responsibility to ‘do the job properly’. In contrast, most men were confident in their ability to navigate these choices successfully. This model of fathering could be legitimated by discourses of intensive parenting, which are intertwined with a neoliberal rationality that emphasises individual responsibility, self-management and control (Wall, 2010).

The men’s accounts raise interesting issues about their perceptions of these apparent gender differentiations in experiences. One suggestion we would make by way of explanation is that they are related to ‘resources of masculinity’ (Doucet, 2007). These resources available to men; such as the emphasis on autonomy and self-reliance espoused by hegemonic masculinity (*ibid*), arguably enable men to reject adherence to the dominant cultural norms of intensive parenting. Being a non-conformist trades upon the hegemonic values of autonomy and independence (Gill *et al.*, 2005); a mode of representation long colonised by men (Wetherell and Edley, 1999). Drawing on discourses of autonomy therefore may offer some insulation for men against the potential vulnerabilities induced by intensive parenting, such as an undermining of parental confidence. It may also be the case that emphasising autonomy is a way of signifying masculinity in the interview situation (Schwalbe and Wolkmir, 2002).

Alongside a reluctance to follow expert advice, the importance of autonomy is also underlined in the men’s rejection of particular aspects of contemporary parenting culture; most notably what they saw as hyper-materialism, related to the notion of intensive parenting requiring significant expenditure (Hays, 1996). Several men commented on how others within their peer groups equated doing the best for their child with buying the most ‘things’. However, the men criticised this over-commercialisation as parent-centred.

‘[T]he perception of getting it right - and this is something I’ve seen certainly with some of my sisters - so to be able to say that getting it right is the ability to buy the top of the range pushchair and the nice car seat and have the big people carrier so they’ve got space to sit in and I don’t ... I wouldn’t measure success on that, I think it’s more

about whether you end up with a nice well-rounded child not a little brat (amusement).’ (Bradley, 26)

‘I mean there’s an awful lot of competition ... in the NCT it was all “what pushchair are you getting, what car seat are you getting?” And I know we’ve tended to go for cheaper options than others. One of our friends was seriously contemplating spending £200 on a highchair, whereas our perfectly functional one cost us £40. So yeah there is, I think there is a bit of sort of pressure on you to get the right things ... But we don’t, he doesn’t wear designer clothes he wears socks that were bought half price in Mothercare sale.’ (Jeffrey, 40)

In addition to this rejection of hyper-materialism, participants also described their positions as ‘rebellious’ or ‘counter-cultural’ in relation to discourses of protectiveness and risk to children.

‘I think as well you know recently, certainly with things like kids playing outside and stuff, in the last sort of ten years I think it’s taken quite a class perception to it as well. You know it’s irresponsible to let your kids play outside; other parents will look down on you if you do. I think that’s really really damaging to kids ... I just think it’s all a massive overreaction, massive overreaction ... it really worries me a lot that I could end up like that, stopping her enjoying herself through fear. That would be a greater worry for me; that I would end up like that, than the risks themselves.’ (Bradley, 26)

Bradley’s comments reflect an understanding of intensive parenting as a middle-class phenomenon (Vincent and Ball, 2007; Fox, 2009), with parents seen as monitoring one another in relation to appropriate behaviour (Bowcock, 2007). Other participants drew upon notions of a ‘classed other’ to justify their parenting approach (Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2000). For example, some participants described the ‘inappropriate care’ and ‘lack of aspirations’ they felt were apparently held by some working-class parents as contrasting with their own high levels of investment and orientation towards their child’s future. In this way, working-class ‘improper and immoral

behaviour' is contrasted with that of the responsible and self-sufficient neoliberal middle-class parent (Allen and Osgood, 2009). As with the rejection of expert advice, Bradley describes his determination to go against this discourse of risk-aversion as it is deemed ultimately costly for his child. In this way, he maintains an identity as a child-centred parent, but this is achieved through autonomous decision-making rather than adhering to dominant cultural norms, following a contemporary moral imperative to actively and reflexively exercise choice (Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2003).

Positioning themselves as upholding what were often seen as middle-class values, without the associated material excess of hyper-materialism and hyper-vigilance may be indicative of the appeal of 'ordinariness' (Savage *et al.*, 2001), whilst emphasising that this was achieved through a process of autonomous decision-making could be an attempt to be seen as 'real' individuals rather than 'social ciphers' (*ibid.*). Previous research has identified these discourses as particularly salient in relation to masculinity as men place emphasis on the ordinariness of self (Wetherell and Edley, 1999), also upholding norms of independence and autonomy, drawing on comparisons with other men to do this (Gill *et al.*, 2005).

The two youngest fathers who participated in a third interview and were asked about intensive parenting did not make the associations described above but instead drew on a discourse of 'doing my best'. These participants had limited time and economic resources to invest in their children as they were not in employment and were not co-resident fathers. Although lamenting the constraints of their circumstances, both were confident that doing their best was sufficient and they did not relate insecurities about parenthood. Like other men across the sample, they rejected 'expert' information or internet advice sites and instead expressed confidence in their own approach to parenting; as Aaron repeatedly emphasised.

'Well I'm just, I'm not trying to be like anyone I'm just trying to be like myself like, just (2) doing it my way, the way that I think's best ... I'll do myself what I think's best, I don't want advice off internet sites. I take advice off my father, I take advice off my father or my grandfather, you know people I'm close to. But not the internet, no it's not, I do it the way I think's best.' (Aaron, 16)

These young men were more likely to take advice from their parents and other family members, and did not express the same scepticism espoused by many middle-class men that their own parents' knowledge was out-dated. These accounts put into question the findings of previous research which suggests that parental confidence is related to class (Fox, 2009). However, the small number of cases for men in these circumstances means such claims would require further substantiation.

So far, we have explored men's relationship to the demands of intensive parenting, illustrating that many of the pressures identified in the literature do not appear to be experienced as intensively by men, which supports existing research (Hays, 1996; Dermott, 2009). We suggest that this is related to the way in which women continue to take primary responsibility for hands-on care and moral identities remain closely linked to this, therefore related demands and pressures are experienced more acutely by mothers. However, rather than suggest that this makes parenting less intensive for men, in the remainder of the paper we consider whether different aspects of parenting may be experienced as pressurised and anxiety-provoking by men in order to further explore issues of gender differentiation in the underpinnings of moral parenting identities.

### **The Intensive Father?**

Overwhelmingly participants were committed to an involved model of fathering, with over half doing some regular sole childcare whilst their partners worked, representing a trend towards men's greater involvement in the 'work' of childrearing (Lewis and Welsh, 2005; Sullivan, 2010). Prior to the birth of their first child, most men idealised a model of involved fatherhood where responsibilities would be shared with their partners, yet post-birth many were surprised at the practical barriers to achieving this; such as their absence from the home due to the demands of paid employment, and the child's dependence on the mother for breastfeeding (Shirani and Henwood, 2011). During this time, one way in which men could demonstrate involvement was by taking on responsibility for long-term and financial planning as well as immediate financial provision. This was an extension of what many had seen as an important

aspect of their male identity beforehand (Henwood *et al.*, 2010) and one of the main anchors for dominant versions of masculinity (Willott and Griffin, 1999). Planning was described as important for providing the ‘best start’ for the child; for example, ensuring there were funds to move house in order to live in a ‘nice area’ was cited as part of a ‘good father’ identity by several men. Planning also incorporated longer-term provision; ensuring they could afford to pay for extracurricular activities, school trips and overseas holidays in order to develop the child’s social and cultural capital.

‘I’ve got a lot of responsibility for planning; I’m the one who tends to look fifteen years ahead – I have actually been looking at child trust funds and who’s got the highest rate of return on them, it’s that kind of level of planning. Um, it’s me who’s going to look at things like where are we going to be living in five years ‘cause I don’t think this is the place for a child to be because there just isn’t the space for them. I tend to take more of a planning view I think, I tend to look at things a lot more long-term whereas Theresa’s a lot more instinctive, do things today type person.’ (Barry, 36)

Here Barry draws a gendered distinction between the parenting work he and his wife are doing and sees this as offering the child different benefits. Whilst his wife takes primary responsibility for day-to-day care, Barry sees part of his responsibility as providing financially, which will enable the family to move to a more suitable family area in a few years time.

Emphasising discourses of providing has been seen as justifying men’s lesser involvement in the work of hands-on childrearing, with paid work outside the home implicitly positioned as preferable for offering some degree of financial autonomy and independent sense of identity. However, such an approach overlooks the challenges inherent in providing, as men see this as an important manifestation of their family commitment (Townsend, 2002) but which comes with ‘stress’ and ‘responsibility’ which limits hands-on involvement in family life. Ranson (2001) suggests that middle-class, professional, primary-provider fathers might encounter particular conflicts in reconciling breadwinning (and the building of professional careers which this role invites) with involved fathering. Previous research has

indicated that even for comfortably off or relatively affluent men, providing could be a source of anxiety (Ranson, 2001).

‘I do equate fatherhood with risk in terms of the work front because I think that becoming a father is going to, you know is likely to hamper my ability to work and what I’m able to do, and obviously I am taking a risk. You know, I would have liked to have been certainly you know reaching a higher position than I am at the moment, um you know I think the ideal situation was I think to have a [promotion] and then become a father but that’s not going to happen.’ (Alun, 33)

‘I suppose it kind of ties in with the anxieties again I suppose, I worry that once I’ve got my PhD will I, will it be for a job that I see as good ... will my child look up to me, will they be proud of me? I kind of think of things like that; will I be able to support the family? You know, I mean obviously we work together, we’ve got a dual income, but I suppose there’s anxieties like that aren’t they; you want to be able to provide for your child.’ (Neil, 29)

These comments reflect what can be seen as individual risks to career building, but also ‘shared risks’ (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002) of family financial misfortune if men are unable to provide. Some men commented on how expectations of providing had expanded in recent years to include supporting their children in early adulthood through assistance with university fees and purchasing cars and homes. This contemporary intensification of pressures meant many began saving for these future expenses soon after their child’s birth.

The continuing emphasis on the centrality of financial provision to a good father identity suggests that good father and good worker identities are unavoidably entwined. However, given the efforts that participants made to be involved in all aspects of childcare, it would be inaccurate to restrict a conception of contemporary fathers to passive breadwinners who facilitate maternal intensification. For fathering practices to be perceived favourably by mothers and children, men needed to do a bit



more than just earn, or look after the 'big picture' (Lewis and Welsh, 2005) and were often involved in hands-on care as well as 'thinking about' the child.

'[T]he father's got to get really hands-on involved here, they cannot just be a wallet in the sense of passing the money over to the mother and the mother goes and buys the stuff for the child, that's not parenting. You've really got to get engaged completely with them, you've got to know everything about your child; you've got to know everything that's going on.' (Barry, 36)

Whilst much has been made of changes in men's fathering behaviour towards greater involvement (Sullivan, 2010), models of the work-focussed provider father show continuity across generations (Brannen and Nilsen, 2006). In contrast, for many white middle-class women, working motherhood constitutes an intergenerational rupture (Thomson *et al.*, forthcoming). The longstanding continuity of male providing may be one reason it remains so strongly in men's accounts as a marker of moral fatherhood identity, whilst motherhood appears to be more closely regulated in terms of traditional associations with hands-on care. William describes a differentiation of parenting anxieties along traditionally gendered lines.

'I think it's just the way men think; you think that you're the one who needs to make sure the finances are in place that you can afford to look after them, which isn't a conscious thing, it's certainly not a sexist thing, it's just the way men's minds work I think; they feel they've got to be the provider. My wife and I earn similar levels of money and both work just as hard, you just feel in yourself that it's your responsibility to make sure that's in place and so you take on a bit more of that, more of the planning and the organising, and make sure you've got the funds. But something my wife's taken on or just naturally seems to worry about more is the childcare side of things, so with Poppy starting nursery she worries a lot more than I do whether it's the right nursery and if she should be going there or not ... So she takes on that worry and I take on the financial worry.'

(William, 30)

William's account clearly describes a gendered division of risk and 'worry' in relation to parenting, with his wife taking on responsibilities for ensuring their child receives appropriate hands-on care whilst he feels a greater responsibility to secure the family's finances. This is perhaps particularly striking in light of the egalitarian division of labour adopted by this couple, who both worked full-time and earned similar levels of money, sharing the hands-on childcare. William's extract highlights the continuing salience of traditional models of parenting in relation to contemporary moral parenting identities, despite changes in practical arrangements.

### **Conclusions**

By exploring the accounts of men over the transition to fatherhood, this paper has considered the extent to which the demands of intensive parenting culture can be seen to extend to fathers in ways that implicate their linked lives with partners. Findings illustrate how men did not appear to experience anxieties around hands-on care, emphasising confidence in their parenting abilities, thus lending support to existing research which indicates pressures around hands-on care are experienced more intensively by women. We suggest that men are able to draw on resources of masculinity which value autonomy and competition, which can insulate them against some of the vulnerabilities apparently faced by mothers. This potentially places men in a position where they are able to alleviate the burdens of intensive parenting culture on women. As Doucet (2007:221) notes "*fathers taking on part of the emotional responsibility for children can help to alleviate mothers' worries and guilt that they are not doing enough for their child.*" Alternatively, their immunity to these anxieties may mean they are unable to understand their partner's concerns and desire to invest in intensive parenting as a strategy to alleviate risk. As a result, women could face feeling undermined by their partners as well as wider society, so the pressure they experience is actually increased.

This paper has moved beyond existing accounts of intensive fatherhood, revoking a maternal lens to elucidate the ways in which parenting may be differently intensive for men. In particular, we have demonstrated how men describe risks and anxieties in relation to financial provision, drawing on insights from previous work which

considered how these pressures were intensified during the economic downturn (Henwood *et al.*, 2010). Given policy documentation on the damaging consequences of child poverty (Field, 2010) and widespread media condemnation of ‘feckless fathers’ who do not fulfil their financial responsibilities (The Sunday Times, March 2010; The Daily Mail, November 2010), alongside emphasis on the importance of resources for ‘concerted cultivation’, it is striking that financial risks have not been considered as pressurising for parents in the same way as expectations around hands-on care. An understanding of the anxieties in relation to providing suggests the need to account for men’s paid work as a manifestation of family commitment rather than a project of the self (Ranson, 2001; Townsend, 2002) or an attempt to avoid the demanding work of hands-on care.

In highlighting the perceived divergence in men and women’s experiences there is a danger of overstating gender differences (Henwood *et al.*, 2008), whereas the connectedness of mothering and fathering is also paramount (Doucet, 2007). By describing the anxieties men experience in relation to providing and those which women reportedly experience in relation to hands-on care, we do not wish to reassert traditional gendered divisions of labour; the practices of our participants would render such a steadfast distinction problematic given men’s involvement in care and women’s significant economic contribution to family life. However, by foregrounding these different aspects of parenting we highlight a continuing implicitly gendered morality around providing and caring (Ribbens McCarthy *et al.*, 2003) related to these traditional roles, rendering different aspects of parenting risky for men and women.

In discussing the subject positions of mothers and fathers we need to also recognise the importance of acknowledging these positions as other than gendered subjects – similarities as well as differences should be recognised. For example, how to balance paid work, other interests and relationships with responsibilities, anxieties and pleasures of childrearing are concerns for both men and women (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Whilst the paper has focussed on gender differences in relation to acceptance of an intensive parenting ethos, we would not want to suggest that women do not also reflexively engage with these cultural discourses. This paper has relied upon men’s accounts of couple experiences of parenting and therefore may present a different picture to one their partners may have described. However, this discussion provides

an important insight into the ways in which men negotiate intensive parenting, an issue which has been relatively overlooked. By adopting a relational perspective, we highlight how this gendered division of parenting risk may be seen as an effective way of dealing with the demands of intensive parenting culture.

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<sup>i</sup> The other sample group comprises 30 men from East Anglia who became fathers in 2000. They were interviewed once before and up to two times after the birth of their first child. 19 of these men were also interviewed in 2008/9 when their first child was eight years old.



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<sup>ii</sup> Numbers in brackets refer to length of pause in seconds