

Exploring the concept of intensive parenting in a three-country study

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Descriptive Finding

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

In recent decades there has been growing interest in the concept of intensive parenting. However, the literature is mostly qualitative and based on Anglo-Saxon countries. This raises the question of how best to operationalise the concept in a wider cross-national setting.

OBJECTIVE

This paper aims to operationalise the theoretical concept of intensive parenting in a cross-national perspective.

METHODS

The data for this study come from the CROss-National Online Survey panel [CRONOS], conducted in Estonia, Great Britain, and Slovenia in 2017. The analysis is based on 18 items on norms related to raising children. Exploratory factor analyses were carried out to identify dimensions of intensive parenting. Variation by respondents' sociodemographics for the different dimensions was also analysed.

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RESULTS

The results reveal four main dimensions regarding contemporary norms of parenting: a child-centred approach, a focus on stimulating children's development, personal responsibility to do one's best for one's children, and pressure to follow experts' advice. These four dimensions were found in all three countries.

CONCLUSIONS

The results partly confirm the conception of intensive parenting originally suggested by Hays (1986). They also reveal that the phenomenon is not restricted to Anglo-Saxon countries but can be operationalised in a similar way in other countries. The findings also reveal some variation by sociodemographic characteristics, but not in a systematic way.

CONTRIBUTION

This is the first study to use random probability population-based samples to operationalise the concept of intensive parenting in a cross-national perspective.

1. Introduction

In recent decades the time and money that parents invest in their children has increased substantially (Gauthier, Smeeding, and Furstenberg 2004; Kornrich and Furstenberg 2013). Simply doing one's best for one's children or meeting a child's basic needs are no longer deemed enough. Today's parents are instead expected to devote considerable time and resources to their children (Ishizuka 2018).

Hays (1986) originally captured this new standard of parenting in the term 'intensive mothering', which she defined as "child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive and financially expensive" (p.8). These norms, she argued, have been partly fuelled by scientific evidence showing the importance of child-centred and child-intensive mothering practices for children's development (Gunderson undated; Wall 2010). Since then, the concept has received increasing interest in the literature, either under the original label of intensive mothering or that of intensive parenting to reflect its relevance to fathers (Wall and Arnold 2007). Findings from this literature have highlighted the pressure on parents to conform to this new standard, even at the expense of their own well-being (Rizzo, Schiffrin, and Liss 2013).

However, the existing empirical evidence is limited in two ways. First, the concept of intensive parenting has mostly been examined in qualitative small-scale studies or in quantitative studies based on non-random samples. For example, the two recent attempts to quantitatively measure intensive parenting are both based on convenience samples recruited from the web (Liss et al. 2013; Loyal, Sutter Dallay, and Rasche 2017). In both cases, the samples over-represented highly educated respondents. It therefore remains

unclear whether the results can be generalised to the broader population (Faircloth, Hoffman, and Layne 2013; Forbes, Donovan, and Lamar 2020; Romagnoli and Wall 2012).⁷ Second, the large majority of studies come from English-speaking countries (Gauthier 2015). This not only raises the question of the generalisability of the concept of intensive parenting across countries, but also whether the survey items which capture intensive parenting in one country translate well to other countries. For example, the recent study by Loyal, Sutter Dallah, and Rasclé (2017) shows that some of the survey items that perform well in the United States (Liss et al. 2013) do not do so in France.

The current paper presents the findings of a unique study in which questions related to the concept of intensive parenting were fielded in a large nationally representative survey in three countries: Estonia, Great Britain, and Slovenia. Its aim is to operationalise the concept of intensive parenting and, especially, to analyse if the dimensions inherent in this concept are the same across the three countries.

2. Data and methods

The data for this study come from the CROss-National Online Survey panel [CRONOS] (2018) conducted in Estonia, Great Britain, and Slovenia. The panel was set up in 2017 as an add-on to the European Social Survey (ESS) Round 8, which itself is based on nationally representative random probability samples. Around one-third of the Round 8 ESS respondents participated in wave 2 of CRONOS (in which our parenting items were fielded): 34% in Estonia, 38% in Great Britain, and 38% in Slovenia (own calculation based on Villar et al. 2018). The total sample size for wave 2 across the three countries was 1,828, reduced for our analysis to 1,695 after the deletion of cases with missing values. The sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 1.

⁷ The only exception is a recent American study in which a nationally representative sample was used to study parenting norms using a vignette approach (Ishizuka 2018). However, the study did not aim to measure norms of intensive parenting but rather norms related to concerted cultivation, based on Lareau's work.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for CRONOS wave 2 respondents, by country. Percentage values (weighted data)

	Great Britain	Estonia	Slovenia
Gender			
Male	46.30	46.85	49.25
Female	53.70	53.15	50.75
Age			
18–29	21.08	18.01	16.68
30–54	32.70	34.93	32.79
50+	46.23	47.06	50.53
Marriage/Legal union			
Yes	52.58	43.37	54.30
No	47.42	56.63	45.70
Children			
Yes	65.81	75.56	75.38
No	34.19	24.44	24.62
Education level			
Low	27.40	14.61	18.05
Medium	29.14	51.06	57.00
High	43.46	34.34	24.95
N	643	598	454
Total N = 1,695			

Note: Education level was recorded based on the ISCED categories with low = ISCED 1 and 2, medium = ISCED 3 and 4, and high = ISCED 5 and 6.

The 18 items fielded were designed to capture the four dimensions inherent in Hays' definition of intensive mothering (see Table 2):

- **Child-centred:** referring to the key premise that children should be the centre of parents' attention, even at the expense of parents' own needs.
- **Expert-guided:** referring to pressure on parents to rely on experts' knowledge on how best to parent.
- **Resource intensive:** referring to the expected time and money investments in children, including the importance of 'being there for the children', as well as the importance of investing in children to provide a good head start in life (e.g., extra-curricular activities).
- **Emotionally absorbing:** referring to the emotional work associated with being a good parent and its related worries and feeling of guilt.

Table 2: Wording of the 18 items on intensive parenting tested in CRONOS, classified according to their theoretical concept

Theoretical dimension/ Short label	Variable number	Exact wording of the item
<u>Child-centred</u>		
ChNeeds ¹	w2q55	Children's needs should come before those of their parents
FamRoutine ²	w2q59*	A family's daily routine should be organised around what works best for parents rather than for their children
ChAttention ³	w2q63	Children should be the centre of their parents' attention
PaLife ⁴	w2q70*	Parents have a life of their own and should not be asked to sacrifice their own well-being for the sake of their children
ChTalents ⁵	w2q67	It is a parents' role to discover and develop their children's special talents
<u>Expert-guided</u>		
AdviceProf ⁶	w2q56	It is best that parents listen to the parenting advice of professionals rather than simply relying on family and friends
BadJob ⁷	w2q60*	Parents who seek advice on parenting are admitting that they are not doing a very good job
PaKnow ⁸	w2q64*	Parents naturally know how best to bring up their children
AwareExperts ⁹	w2q68	Good parents should be aware of what experts say and write about the development of children
<u>Resource-intensive</u>		
LessAvailable ¹⁰	w2q57*	It is alright for parents to, now and then, be less available to their children
AlwaysAvailable ¹¹	w2q61	Parents should always be available to their children
Activities ¹²	w2q65	To reach their full potential, it is important that children take part in a wide range of organised activities outside of their home
BasicNeeds ¹³	w2q69	Parents should make sure their children's basic needs are met, even if it means cutting down on essentials for themselves
LatestToys ¹⁴	w2q71*	Good parents are those who buy their children the latest toys and gadgets
<u>Emotionally absorbing</u>		
ChSuccess ¹⁵	w2q58	A child's successes and failures mostly reflect how well their parents are bringing them up
ChMistakes ¹⁶	w2q62*	Parents need to give children the freedom to learn from their own mistakes
PaWorry ¹⁷	w2q66	Good parents constantly worry about their child's well-being and comfort
PaStress ¹⁸	w2q72	Parenting is very stressful if you want to do it right

Note: The original response scale was from '1' strongly agree to '5' strongly disagree. Items with an asterisk were coded accordingly, while the others were reverse-coded, so for all items a higher score means a higher support for the intensive parenting norm. Note also that originally the phrasing of the item 'Latest Toys' was meant to capture the resource-intensive aspect of the measured concept. However, after further consideration, we concluded that with the mention of "gadgets", the item could be interpreted as an indicator of "negative investment", which might even hinder a child's development. As a result, we decided to view this item as capturing the opposite of intensive parenting.

Sources of the items: (1) Liss et al. (2013). The original wording was "Children's needs should come before their parents". (2) Liss et al. (2013). The original wording was "A child's schedule should take priority over the needs of their parents". (3) Liss et al. (2013). The original wording was "Children should be the center of attention". (4) The World Value Survey and the European Values Survey. (5) Own item. (6) Adapted from The UK CANparent evaluation (Lindsay et al. 2014). (7) Adapted from The UK CANparent evaluation (Lindsay et al. 2014). (8) Own item. (9) The New Families In the Netherlands Study (Poortman, Van der Lippe, Boele-Woelki 2014). The original wording was: "Good parents are aware of what experts say and write about the development of their children". (10) Own item. (11) Own item. (12) Adapted from Liss et al. (2013). (13) Own item. (14) Own item. (15) The Pew Research Center (2015). (16) Own item. (17) Own item. (18) Own item.

Some items were adapted from previous surveys, while others were developed by our team on the basis of Hays' definition together with results of other qualitative studies (Leigh et al. 2012). All items were phrased to capture social norms (e.g., what is expected of good parents) rather than parenting behaviour (e.g., what good parents do). They were also phrased so that the whole adult population could answer them, not just parents.

For all items, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed using a five-point scale (Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, Disagree, Strongly disagree). Responses were recoded (where applicable, see Table 2) so that a high score represents high support for the notion of intensive parenting. Importantly, the order in which respondents were shown the eighteen items did not follow the four domains listed above. Instead, the items were mixed to avoid repetitive response patterns. The same order was used for all respondents.

3. Analytical strategy

In the first part of the analysis, we carried out a series of Exploratory Factor Analyses using principal component analysis with varimax rotation involving the polychoric correlation matrix, using the Stata-user written command "polychoric" (Kolenikov and Angeles 2004). This was appropriate due to the ordinal nature of our items. Internal consistency of the factors was assessed by the ordinal alpha using the method suggested by Zumbo, Gadermann, and Zeisser (2007). In the second part, the scores for scales were computed based on the polychoric rotated loading matrix, using the command "predict" in Stata. Finally, variation in the support for intensive parenting by the respondents' sociodemographic characteristics was analysed using Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression. While this does not constitute a systematic validation of the scales, it is a step towards understanding whether specific subgroups of the population support intensive parenting to a greater extent than others.

We performed all of our analyses in Stata and used the provided weights (W2WEIGHT), which "incorporate the ESS8 design weight and adjustments for nonresponse at both ESS8 and the respective CRONOS wave" (Villar et al. 2018). The mean value of the weights for each country was equal to 1, ensuring that each country counted equally in our pooled analyses.

4. Results

A series of preliminary analyses was carried out for each country separately and for the cross-nationally pooled dataset in order to identify the best factor solution. This preliminary stage revealed a four-factor solution based on 14 of the 18 items. This solution mapped the items in almost the same way in Britain and Slovenia, with some differences in Estonia (further discussed below). Factor loadings for the pooled data appear in Table 3.

Table 3: Factor loadings from the exploratory factor analysis on the pooled cross-national data

Item	Child-centred	Stimulation	Parental responsibility	Expert-guided	Original dimensions
ChNeeds	0.6518	-0.0122	0.1924	0.0805	Child-centred
LessAvailable	0.5434	-0.0932	-0.2936	-0.1350	Resource (time)
AlwaysAvailable	0.7429	0.1509	-0.1346	0.0146	Resource (time)
ChAttention	0.6140	0.2680	-0.2753	0.2218	Child-centred
BasicNeeds	0.4915	0.2164	0.4692	0.1159	Resource-intensive
PaLife	0.5657	0.0181	0.4190	-0.1605	Child-centred
Activities	-0.0426	0.6993	0.1590	0.0831	Resource (activities)
PaWorry	0.2528	0.6987	-0.2080	0.0406	Emotionally absorbing
ChTalents	0.0757	0.7577	-0.0990	0.1037	Child-centred
BadJob	0.0228	-0.1038	0.7251	-0.0204	Expert-guided
LatestToys	-0.1318	-0.0216	0.6471	-0.4079	Resource (goods)
PaKnow	-0.1518	-0.3533	0.5523	0.2560	Expert-guided
AdviceProf	0.0155	-0.0721	0.0167	0.8490	Expert-guided
AwareExperts	0.0363	0.3434	-0.1029	0.7546	Expert-guided

Note: weighted data; figures in bold show the highest loading (14 items) - based on preliminary analyses, the following items were excluded: FamRoutine (w2q59), ChSuccess (w2q58), ChMistakes (w2q62), and PaWorry (w2q66).

These results are compared below with those of the aforementioned American and French studies, which also used Hays' work as a starting point (see Table 4).

Table 4: Comparison of the dimensions of intensive parenting and related items in our study and in two others

Own study (CRONOS)	Liss et al. (2013) ¹	Loyal, Sutter Dallay, and Rasclé (2017) ¹
<u>Child-centred</u> Children's needs Centre of attention Less available* Always available Basic needs Parents' life of their own*	<u>Child-centred</u> Children's needs Centre of attention Child's schedule	<u>Child-centrism</u> Children's needs Child's schedule
<u>Stimulation</u> Activities Parents worry Child's talents	<u>Stimulation</u> Educational opportunities Classes, lessons, activities Intellectual stimulation Interact regularly	<u>Stimulation</u> Must stimulate On their level
<u>Parental responsibility</u> Bad job* Parents know best* Latest toys*	---	---
<u>Expert-guided</u> Professional advice Aware of experts	---	---
---	<u>Challenging</u> Demanding job Corporate executive No mental break Exhausting No time for oneself Wide-ranging skills	<u>Challenge</u> Demanding job Corporate executive
---	---	<u>Sacrifice</u> Time for oneself Personal life Not allowed to be tired

Note: "*" marks the items that were phrased in reverse. See Table 2 for details.

1. The two other studies also found one dimension related to gender (i.e., who is best at parenting) (which they both labelled 'essentialism'), and one related to 'fulfilment' (e.g., parenting as greatest joy). They are not reported in this table since they do not capture per se the 'intensification' of parenting.

Sources: Liss et al. (2013): results from Table 2 (25 items from the initial set of 56). Loyal, Sutter Dallay, and Rasclé (2017): results from Table 2 (21 items).

4.1 Results from the pooled analysis

The results show that the four factors have some similarities to the dimensions inherent in Hays' definition and those found in previous studies, but also some differences. The identified factors can be interpreted as follows.

The first factor captures elements of **'Child-centredness'**, the key premise being that children should be the centre of parents' attention, including a significant time investment. It comprises six items, combining items related to Hays' 'child-centred' and 'time-intensive' dimensions. This first factor explains 23% of the variance with an ordinal alpha of 0.78. However, one of the items, BasicNeeds, also loaded on the Parental Responsibility factor, suggesting that it relates to two latent concepts. The other two studies found a similar factor.

The second factor is related to **'Stimulation'**, in that it emphasises the importance of parents stimulating their children's development; for instance, by nurturing their talents and enrolling them in extra-curricular activities. It explains 17% of the variance and has an ordinal alpha of 0.80. In the case of Estonia, this factor also included the two items related to parental time. In the other two countries and in the pooled solution, these items instead aligned with the previous 'child-centred' dimension. This stimulation factor is not explicitly part of Hays' conception of intensive parenting. However, it is in line with the concept of "concerted cultivation" in Lareau's (2002) work, which refers to a cultural logic of childrearing requiring a high level of parental investment. The other two studies found a similar factor.

The third factor is related to **'Parental responsibility'**. It captures the overall pressure that parents feel in terms of their own personal responsibility to do their best for their children. It combines the item capturing disapproval of irresponsible expenditure on children and an item related to 'expert-guided' parenting. It explains 16% of the variance and has an ordinal alpha of 0.78. A similar factor was not found in the other two studies.

The final factor is related to **'Expert-guidance'**. It is in line with Hays' definition in terms of focusing on the importance of listening to experts on how best to raise one's children. It explains 15% of the variance and has an ordinal alpha of 0.84. Interestingly, items related to expert guidance were included in the initial set of items in the American study, but were not retained in the final analysis (Liss 2018).

Where our findings diverge from our original theoretical expectations is that they did not reveal any distinct factor related to emotional involvement. Of the four items that we had included to tap into this concept, only one remained in our final solution and it loaded on the Stimulation factor. This is in contrast to the American and French studies, which found two factors related to emotional investment: parenting as challenging and as involving sacrifice.

4.2 Variation by sociodemographic characteristics

Based on the above results, we then computed four subscales and used them as dependent variables in a series of regression models. We used as covariates characteristics of the respondents that we theoretically expected to be associated with intensive parenting norms. We included the age, sex, and education level of the respondents, as well as the presence of children in the household (see Table 5).

Table 5: Results of regression analyses using four subscales as dependent variables (pooled sample, N = 1,695)¹

	Child-centred		Stimulation		Parental resp.		Expert-guided	
	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE	b	SE
Country								
Great Britain (ref.)								
Estonia	-0.15*	0.06	0.09+	0.05	-0.40***	0.06	0.38***	0.06
Slovenia	-0.54***	0.06	0.14*	0.06	-0.39***	0.07	0.05	0.07
Age								
18-29 (ref.)								
30-49	-0.09	0.08	-0.09	0.08	-0.02	0.08	0.05	0.09
50+	-0.29***	0.09	0.00	0.08	-0.19*	0.09	0.31***	0.09
Gender								
Male (ref.)								
Female	-0.02	0.05	-0.08+	0.04	0.14**	0.05	-0.02	0.05
Educational level								
Low (ref.)								
Medium	-0.13	0.08	-0.18**	0.07	0.16*	0.08	0.04	0.09
High	-0.27**	0.09	-0.24***	0.07	0.51***	0.08	0.15+	0.08
Children								
Yes (ref.)								
No	-0.24***	0.07	-0.02	0.07	0.15*	0.06	0.15*	0.07
Constant	6.10***	0.12	5.06***	0.10	4.90***	0.11	3.24***	0.13
AIC	4172.23		3992.90		4057.46		4131.78	
BIC	4221.15		4041.82		4106.38		4180.70	
R ²	0.09		0.02		0.15		0.07	
N	1,695		1,695		1,695		1,695	

Note: + p<0.10, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

1. Where a high value of the dependent variable means a higher support for intensive parenting.

Results show that the variation by sociodemographic characteristics is not systematically the same across the four subscales. In particular, we found no statistically significant difference between men and women in the support for intensive parenting,

with the exception of the subscale on parental responsibility, where women scored higher. Moreover, while older respondents scored higher on the expert-guided subscale, they scored lower on the child-centred and parental responsibility subscales. As to education, results show that more highly educated respondents scored lower on the child-centred and stimulation subscales (as compared to their less educated counterparts), while they scored higher on the parental responsibility and expert-guided subscales. No systematic pattern emerged for the other covariates.

The models also included country dummies, which can be interpreted as the country-level support for intensive parenting after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics. Results show that support for intensive parenting in relation to the child-centred and parental responsibility subscales is lower in Estonia and Slovenia than in Britain. The opposite result is found for the other two scales. In all these models the value of the R-square is low, suggesting that these sociodemographic characteristics explain only a very small fraction of the variance in the scales.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to operationalise the theoretical concept of intensive parenting using a three-country random probability population-based sample. This is unique, as most of the literature in this field is qualitative or based on convenience samples. Moreover, our sample comprises respondents from the whole adult population, rather than parents only. This allows us to assess the extent to which the norm of intensive parenting is broadly endorsed within these three countries.

Our overall conclusion is that the concept of intensive parenting can be operationalised as involving four dimensions: a child-centred approach, a focus on stimulation activities, personal responsibility to do one's best for one's children, and a reliance on expert guidance. The first two of these dimensions were also found in the other two studies reviewed and therefore appear to be at the core of contemporary parenting. Furthermore, the dimension on stimulation is integral to Lareau's notion of 'concerted cultivation'. The dimension on parental responsibility was not found in the other studies. However, it echoes neoliberal discourses on personal responsibility, which have been highlighted in various qualitative studies on intensive parenting (e.g., Leigh et al. 2012). As to the expert-guided dimension, it is consistent with Hays' definition.

Contrary to our expectations, we found no separate dimension related to parental time investment or to financial investment. These items instead aligned with other parenting dimensions. This suggests that these two elements do not empirically form distinct dimensions. It is also possible that parenting norms and attitudes have changed since Hays' original study in the 1980s. In particular, the importance attached to different

aspects of parenting could have shifted; for example, with more weight being attached to stimulation activities.

The other main conclusion that emerged from our analysis is that the dimensions behind the concept of intensive parenting appear to be similar in the three countries in our study. This is an important finding, which adds to an emerging but still small – and mostly qualitative – international literature on the topic (e.g., Faircloth, Hoffman, and Layne 2013; Ennis 2014; O'Brien et al. 2020).

Our results also reveal that support for intensive parenting varies across the sociodemographic characteristics of respondents, but not systematically in the same way across the four subscales. For instance, two aspects of intensive parenting were found to have higher support among those with a higher level of education, while the opposite was found for the other two. This goes against both Lareau's thesis regarding systematic social class difference in childrearing norms and behaviour and a recent American study in which no significant differences were found in intensive mothering norms across several demographic characteristics (Forbes, Donovan, and Lamar 2020). Overall, what our results instead suggest is that specific dimensions of intensive parenting might carry different meanings for different subgroups.

These findings generate unique evidence regarding the operationalisation of intensive parenting. At the same time, this study has important limitations. First, while the original sample for this study was nationally representative, the overall low response rate makes it harder to generalise the results. This is especially the case if unobserved characteristics related to people's views on parenting have influenced their willingness to participate in the survey. Second, the study was carried out in only three countries, thus calling for further examination of the concept in other contexts. This is especially important in view of known cross-national differences; for instance, in the importance attached to education in Asia (Anderson and Kohler 2013). Third, as this study is exploratory, further testing of the items and subscales is needed to establish their validity.

Our findings have important implications for demographic research. In particular, societal norms around intensive parenting can help to explain the increase in parental time and financial investments in children that have been reported in other studies (e.g., Craig, Powell, and Smyth 2014). In turn, these large parental investments, which increase the overall cost of having children, can be posited as influencing decisions around having children. For instance, a recent study in Poland showed that men and women who perceive childrearing as demanding in terms of time, energy, and money express a weaker desire for parenthood (Mynarska and Rytel 2020). Further refinement of the measurement of intensive parenting norms is certainly needed. The inclusion of such items in future demographic surveys would allow researchers to explore the extent to which these norms are endorsed in other societal contexts, and how these norms influence individuals' fertility decisions.

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