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### Citation for published version

Gauthier, Anne and Mynarska, Monika and Fadel, Louisa and Koops, Judith and Bryson, Caroline and Haux, Tina (2020) Exploring the concept of intensive parenting in a three-country study. *Demographic Research* . (In press)

### DOI

### Link to record in KAR

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### Document Version

Author's Accepted Manuscript

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

## Abstract:

### BACKGROUND

There has been a growing interest in the concept of intensive parenting in recent decades. However this 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' socio-demographics for the different dimensions was also analysed.

### RESULTS

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

### CONCLUSIONS

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

## Introduction

In recent decades, the time and money that parents invest in their children have increased substantially (Gauthier et al. 2004; Kornich and Furstenberg 2013). Simply doing one's best for 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).

This new standard of parenting was originally captured by Hays (1986) under the term 'intensive mothering' which she defined as "child-centered, 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-centered and child-intensive mothering practices for child 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 for fathers (Wall and Arnold 2007). Findings from this literature have highlighted the high pressure on parents to conform to this new standard, even at the expense of their own well-being (Rizzo et al. 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 were both based on convenience samples recruited from the web (Liss et al. 2013; Loyal et al. 2017). In both cases the samples had an over-representation of highly-educated respondents. It therefore remains unclear whether the results can be generalised to the broader population (Faircloth et al. 2013; Forbes et al. 2020; Romagnoli and Wall 2012).<sup>1</sup> 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 et al. (2017) showed that some of the survey items that performed well in the US (Liss et al. 2013) did 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 operationalize the concept of**

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<sup>1</sup> The only exception in this field of research is a recent American study in which a nationally representative sample was used to study parenting norms using a vignette approach (Ishizuka 2018). The study did not however aim at measuring norms of intensive parenting but rather those related to concerted cultivation based on Lareau's work.

intensive parenting and, especially, to analyse if the dimensions inherent to this concept are the same across the three countries.

## 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, itself based on nationally representative random probability samples. Around one-third of the 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 1828, reduced for our analysis to 1695 after the deletion of cases with missing values. The socio-demographic characteristics of the sample are summarised in Table 1.

The 18 items fielded were designed to capture the four dimensions inherent in Hays' definition of intensive mothering (see Table 1):

- **Child-centered:** 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 pressures on parents to rely on experts' knowledge on how best to parent.
- **Emotionally absorbing:** referring to the emotional work associated with being a good parent and its related worries and feeling of guilt.
- **Resource intensive:** referring to the expected time and money investment into 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).

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 (Parson 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 parents do). They were also phrased so that they could be answered by the whole adult population, not just parents.

For all items, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed using a five-point scale (from 1: very strongly agree, to 5: very strongly disagree). Importantly, the order in which respondents were shown the eighteen items did not follow the four domains listed above. The items were instead mixed to avoid repetitive response patterns and the same order was used for all respondents.

## 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 et al. (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, the variation in the support for intensive parenting by sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents 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 if intensive parenting is supported to a greater extent by specific subgroups of the population.

We performed all of our analyses in Stata and used the provided weights (PSPWGHT) 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.

## Results

A series of preliminary analyses was carried out for each country separately and for the cross-nationally pooled dataset 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. These results are compared below with those of the American and French studies referred to earlier and which also used Hays’ work as a starting point (see Table 4).

### *Results from the pooled analysis*

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

**Child-centered:** the key premise of this dimension is that children should be the centre of parents’ attention, requiring a significant time investment, even at the expense of parents’ own needs. It includes a total of six items, combining items related to Hays’ ‘child-centered’ and ‘time intensive’ dimensions. This first factor explains 23 percent of the variance with an ordinal alpha of 0.78. One of the items, BasicNeeds, however also loaded on the Parental Responsibility factor suggesting that it relates to two latent concepts. The other two studies also found a similar factor.

**Stimulation:** this dimension emphasises the importance for parents to stimulate their children's development, for instance by nurturing their talents and enrolling them in extra-curricular activities. It explains 17 percent 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-centered' dimension.

This stimulation factor is not explicitly part of Hays' conception of intensive parenting. It is however 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 also found a similar factor.

**Parental responsibility:** this dimension relates to the overall pressure that parents feel in terms of their own personal responsibility to do their best for their children. It includes a combination of items originally related to 'resource intensive' and 'expert-guided'. It explains 16 percent of the variance and has an ordinal alpha of 0.78. A similar factor was not found in the other two studies.

**Expert-guided:** this dimension – in line with Hays' definition – focuses on the importance of listening to experts on how best to raise children. It explains 15 percent of the variance and has an ordinal alpha of 0.85. Interestingly, items related to expert guidance were included among 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 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 being challenging and as involving a sacrifice.

### ***Variations by socio-demographic 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 which we theoretically expected to be associated with norms of intensive parenting. We included the age, sex, and education level of the respondents as well as the presence of children in the household (see Table 5).

Results show that the variations by socio-demographic characteristics are 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 lower. Moreover, while older respondents scored lower on the expert-guided subscale, they scored higher on the child-centered and parental responsibility subscales. As to education, results show that more highly educated respondents scored higher on the child-centered and stimulation subscales (as compared to their less educated counterparts), while they scored lower on the parental responsibility and expert-guided ones. 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 socio-demographic characteristics. Results show that support for intensive parenting is higher in Estonia and Slovenia, as compared to Britain, for the child-centered and parental responsibility subscales. 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.

## 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, as opposed to only parents, thus allowing us to better assess the extent of the norm in the population.

The overall conclusion that we draw is that the concept of intensive parenting can be operationalised as involving four dimensions: a child-centered approach, a focus on stimulation activities, a personal responsibility to do one's best for 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. The dimension on stimulation is furthermore integral to Lareau's notion of 'concerted cultivation'. The dimension on parental responsibility was not found in the other studies. It however echoes neo-liberal discourses on personal responsibility which have been highlighted in various qualitative studies on intensive parenting (eg. Parson et al. 2012). As to the expert-guided dimension, it is consistent with Hays' definition. Contrarily to Hays, we found no separate dimension related to parental time investment, nor on financial investment. These items instead aligned with other parenting dimensions. What this suggests is that the elements that Hays identified in her seminal definition of intensive parenting do not empirically form distinct dimensions but instead combine in a way to reveal other latent dimensions. It is also possible that parenting norms and attitudes have changed since her original study in the 1980s. In particular, the

importance attached to different aspects of parenting could have shifted, for example with more weight on 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 included 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 et al. 2013; Ennis 2014; O'Brien et al. 2020).

Our results also reveal that the support for intensive parenting varies across the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. Part of this variation matches what could be expected theoretically. For example, the positive association between education and the child-centered and stimulation subscales is consistent with results from time-use studies which have shown that more highly educated parents devote more time to their children, and especially on learning-oriented activities, than less educated parents (Craig 2006; Guryan et al. 2008). At the same time, our results also show that these patterns of association are not systematically the same across the four subscales. This can suggest that the overall concept of intensive parenting is not supported exclusively by a selected subgroup of the population. Instead, different dimensions of this concept appear to carry different meanings for different subgroups. If so, this would go in line with findings from a recent American study in which no significant difference for norms of intensive mothering were found for several demographic characteristics (Forbes et al. 2020).

These findings generate unique evidence regarding the operationalisation of intensive parenting. At the same time, this study had important limitations. First, while the original sample for this study was nationally representative, the overall low response rate makes it harder to generalize 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 in only three countries thus calling for further examination of the concept in other contexts. This would be important especially in view of known cross-national differences, for instance in the importance attached to education in Asia (Anderson and Kohler 2013). Third, with this study being exploratory, more testing of the items and subscales would be needed to establish their validity.

Our findings have important implications for demographic research on fertility. In particular, societal norms of intensive parenting can help to explain the increase in parental time and financial investments into children that have been reported in other studies (e.g. Craig et al. 2014). In turn, these large parental investments, by increasing the overall costs of children, can be posited to be influencing the decision to have children. For instance, a recent study for Poland has showed that men and women who perceive childrearing as demanding in terms of time, energy and money express weak 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 demographic surveys should allow researchers in the future to see the extent to which these norms are endorsed in other societal contexts and to verify how these norms influence individuals' fertility decisions.

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