Introduction: 'Changing Parenting Culture'

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Introduction

The essays in this special section emerge from the 'Changing Parenting Culture' series of ESRC research seminars, held between January 2009 and June 2011 at a range of UK universities. Run by the network of scholars 'Parenting Culture Studies',[1] the seminars brought together academics working internationally in a range of disciplines, as well as those in policy and practice to examine shifts in parenting culture. Topics discussed included parenting culture and risk, gender and policy, and the extension of 'parenting' into the pre-pregnancy phase.[2]

What is 'Parenting Culture'?

1.1 Over the last twenty years, 'parenting' has emerged as a concept in both the US and the UK, to characterise the activity that parents do in raising children (Hoffman n.d.). According to Hoffman, 'parenting' – the transformation of the noun 'parent' into a verb 'to parent' – is a relatively recent phenomenon that became prominent in the 1950s in language used by psychologists, sociologists and self-help practitioners, but that has subsequently spread into wider usage. Its popularity, in fact, can be seen in the extent to which 'parenting' has become a buzz-word in policy circles – with the UK government unveiling its *National Academy of Parenting Practitioners* in 2007, with a view to training 'parent trainers', who in turn would instruct parents in optimal techniques.

1.2 Parenting, our network argues, is not just a new word for child rearing. Instead, it denotes a specific skill-set: a certain level of expertise about children and their care, based on the latest research on child-development, and an affiliation to a certain way of raising a child. Pre-emininent is an assertion that parents should adopt a form of 'tough love' (Demos 2009[3]) or 'Positive' parenting (Sears 2001) – that is, one that is 'authoritative', but not 'authoritarian'. Being well-educated is often a requirement for participation in these choices, as is a certain access to economic resources which enable parents to consume the material goods that in turn come to define the various methods of infant care. As Hoffman says, however:

> Most of all [parenting] means being both discursively positioned by and actively contributing to the networks of ideas, values, practices and social relations that have come to define a particular form of the politics of parent-child relations within the domain of the contemporary family (n.d.).

1.3 It is in this sense that we talk about 'parenting culture'. Other sociologists also argue that the emergence of 'parenting' needs to be seen as part of a larger social commentary of the family 'at risk' or 'in crisis.' The health and safety of children, for example, is increasingly seen to be compromised by a 'toxic' social environment (Furedi 2008). An inflated sense of risk, Furedi argues, opens the door to increased surveillance and policy 'advice'. Furthermore, the family is ever more located as the source of and solution to a whole host of social ills, from poor educational outcome to recidivism (which brings us back to the *Parenting Practitioners,* above). Indeed, 'parenting' has acquired a particular place in contemporary society, in which the burden of managing risks is increasingly devolved onto individuals and families (Hoffman n.d.).

1.4 'Parenting' is, of course, heavily gendered. Even the word 'parenting' obscures the reality that 'mothers are still the people who do most childrearing and have most responsibility for children, [and] any examination of parenting has to take seriously this gender differentiation and the ways in which it is underpinned by power relations' (Phoenix et al 1991: 5). Accordingly, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood,* the sociologist Sharon Hays shows how it is mothers who are now encouraged to parent their children 'intensively' (Hays 1996). Writing on the basis of research with working mothers in the United States, she argues that 'intensive motherhood' is an emergent ideology that urges mothers to 'spend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children' (1996: x). Hays suggests that this injunction remains culturally salient, despite an uneasy relationship with the logic of the work place, both

because it props up the capitalist infrastructure and because mothering is perceived as 'the last best defence against what many people see as the impoverishment of social ties, communal obligations and unremunerated commitments' (1996: xiii). This, in turn, has had a profound impact on the way mothers experience parenthood (Douglas and Michaels 2004; Furedi 2008). Many of our participants have also explored the ways in which intensive mothering is (or is not) being translated into the world of fathering (Dermott 2008, Collier and Sheldon 2008, Featherstone 2009). Indeed, a number of scholars in our network have remarked on the decline of 'Mothering' (which is increasingly being referred to as 'Parenting') ostensibly as a means of avoiding the stigmatisation of mothers. Paradoxically, 'Fathering' is on the rise, a term increasingly employed as part of a language of 'rights' (as opposed to responsibilities).

Introducing the papers

1.5 The papers presented here take a range of methodological approaches in their exploration of parenting culture, from analyses of media and policy developments to participant observation and ethnographic 'story-telling'. A similarity they share, however, is that they all take a marginal example (whether statistical or ideological) as a vantage point from which to view wider trends in 'parenting': the alcohol-consuming pregnant woman, the (falsely accused) abusive teacher, the teenage mother and the long-term breastfeeder. Here, we try to give not only an introduction to their empirical content, but to look at some of their thematic and theoretical similarities.

1.6 Firstly, Ellie Lee and Pam Lowe look at how Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) has been reported in British newspapers, as a means of exploring broader notions of contemporary motherhood. Despite the fact FASD is itself a highly controversial grouping of symptoms under one 'disorder,' they show how over time there has been a marked increase in discussions of it in the press, as a result of rising concern about alcohol consumption in pregnancy more generally. Indeed, their argument is that despite a lack of evidence (a theme to which we will return, below) around the effect of moderate alcohol consumption on the developing fetus, stories about FASD intersect with injunctions around 'good motherhood' to promote abstinence from alcohol for all mothers. To this extent, they provide a genealogy of cultural anxiety, showing how clinical evidence has little bearing on public perceptions; being rather an epidemiological question around how stereotypes assume a social velocity in private lives and public discourses.

1.7 How and why such anxiety assumes such cultural salience forms the backdrop to our second paper. Using an 'ethnographic, composite, fictional, storied' methodology, Heather Piper and Pat Sikes focus on another statistically marginal yet culturally powerful figure: the teacher accused of inappropriate touching of children. Oscillating between the poles of trust and risk, they show how contact between children and professionals 'in loco parentis' has become a heavily regulated domain, (their analysis therefore reflecting the way in which other day-to-day parent-child relationships are increasingly subject to formal monitoring.) Whilst monitoring itself implies a certain suspicion, or lack of trust of those with parental responsibilities, a more sinister undertone to this article is that fear of paedophilia increasingly taints all adult-child relationships. In the context of a risk society, the authors argue, anyone suspected of being a paedophile, 'regardless of how thin the evidence' is extremely vulnerable to 'negative public attention, harassment, violence and even murder'. In line with wider parenting culture, the child in this scenario is considered vulnerable, innocent and in need of protection; they are also assumed never to lie about abuse. To this end, they document in harrowing detail the devastating personal and professional implications for a teacher falsely accused of inappropriate contact with pupils and offer some recommendations to policy makers, engaging very recent statements from Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education about the issue of no-touch policy in schools (BBC News,[4]). Their article concludes that whilst of course children are in need of protection from abuse in institutional settings (and beyond) the balance has recently been tipped too far in favour of children, which undermines the authority of teachers, and in turn jeopardises their profession more widely.

1.8 To this extent, their account picks up a theme from our next paper: the blurring between the categories of child and adult, whereby children are treated more and more like adults, and adults more and more like children (Furedi 2009). The teenage mother – the third of our marginal case studies – has long been seen as a paradoxical figure: neither adult nor child, she is yet both. Jan Macvarish uses this unique vantage point from which to reflect on a wider trend towards what she calls the 'infantilisation' of parents. As Hays notes, all parents today are infantilised to the extent that they are encouraged to seek expert guidance over their parenting practices, which are seen to be too important to be left to chance. Yet the teenage mother magnifies this injunction. Long considered an example of social decline, the teenage parent is now reconfigured as a person in need of 'rescuing' – a 'victim' who has been let down and whose redemption lies through the acceptance of 'support'. Yet as a range of academics have shown, this is a peculiar celebration of the victim status, especially since many teenage mothers report that having a baby is a fundamentally positive experience for them and their families (Duncan *et al* 2010). Similarly, as Macvarish notes, where an ideology of 'intensive' parenting dictates 'good' motherhood to be full-time, emotional absorbing care of children, who is more suited to fulfil these requirements – the teenager who has little else in the way of public roles of ambitions to distract her, or the older, middle-class woman who has ambitions to maintain a life beyond motherhood?

1.9 What this points to, of course, is the specific historical period in which our authors are writing. Hays is well aware of the irony that, at a time when more and more women have entered the work-force, an ideology of 'intensive' mothering should have such a hold over women, creating what she calls a 'cultural contradiction' for the majority of mothers. But it is not the case for *all* mothers. Some – like the majority of long-term breastfeeders that Faircloth works with – opt to invest their 'identity work' in one of these spheres, often at the expense of the other.

1.10 Documenting what Hoffman refers to as 'parental tribalism', both Macvarish and Faircloth's papers

show the myriad ways in which different parental choices and behaviour have become a site for identity formation. Indeed, the women in Faircloth's study who practice a philosophy of 'attachment' parenting demonstrate the tribalism inherent to an intensive mothering ideology to a greater extent than most, in that they self-identify through their chosen method of care. In explaining their long-term feeding (just one element of this philosophy), these women rely on a range of strategies, but it is the scientific that Faircloth focuses on here. (That is, that long-term breastfeeding is what 'science' says is best for mothers and babies). Whilst there is no evidence that long-term breastfeeding is at all harmful, what we see – as in Lee and Lowe's paper – is that actual clinical evidence in fact has little bearing on the 'scientific' claimsmaking that goes on in its name; that is, there is little clinical evidence that long-term breastfeeding is beneficial. Nevertheless, advocates prefer to rely on the authority of science as a primary 'accountability strategy' over and above other means of rationalisation (such as the affective). This paper is therefore an exploration of the ways in which authority operates in contemporary parenting debates, how it intersects with individual 'identity work', and a salutary lesson in the need to detach description from prescription. Even if a certain parenting practice is 'scientifically optimal', does this necessarily mean it is what parents should do? What might be being eclipsed through this perspective? A future Parenting Culture Studies event plans to discuss these themes in more depth.[5]

Conclusion

2.1 All of the papers here explore the kinds of evidence which are increasingly called upon to make what might best be called moral arguments about the best way to raise children. Teenage motherhood is actually in decline, excessive maternal drinking affects only a tiny proportion of live births, children are safer today than they have ever been and evidence for differential outcomes with respect to feeding method are more limited than the advocacy literature suggests (Wolf, in press). Why is it then, that parenting culture inspires such moralisation, negative stereotyping and tribalism? Our network will continue to discuss just what it is about parenting that 'matters' so much at both the micro- and macro-social level. We would like to thank the editors of Sociological Research Online for the opportunity to publish this special section, and we welcome readers of this piece to join us as we continue our deliberations by attending our events, looking at our website or emailing us directly.

Notes

[1]See http://blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingculturestudies/ for more information.

[2]See http://www.parentingculturestudies.org/seminar-series/index.html for further details.

[3]See: http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/parenting Accessed 7.10.10

[4]See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-11458137 Accessed 7.10.10

[5] http://blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingculturestudies/current-research/in-progress/

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