

Intensive Parenting or Intensive Mothering? Class, Gender, and Parenting Evaluations¹

Social scientists have documented large and persistent differences by socioeconomic status and by gender in parental time use and interactions with children. College-educated parents spend more time with children (England and Srivastava 2013; Guryan, Hurst, and Kearney 2008), spend that time differently (Kalil, Ryan, and Corey 2012), schedule their children in more organized activities (Bradley et al. 2001; Lareau and Weininger 2008), use less physical punishment (Taylor et al. 2010), and are more involved in their children's schooling (Roska and Potter 2011) compared with other parents. Additionally, mothers continue to spend significantly more time with children than fathers (Sayer, Bianchi, and Robinson 2004), even when employed full time (Raley, Bianchi, and Wang 2012). These parenting differences, in turn, are associated with children's academic, social, and emotional outcomes, and are theorized to contribute to gender inequality among parents.

Theory: Culture has been theorized to play a critical role in explaining why we observe these parenting differences. Lareau (2003) asserts that parents of different social classes have distinctive "cultural logics of childrearing." In this model, cultural differences in how parents view good parenting drive behavior (England and Srivastava 2013). Culture is also hypothesized to be important in explaining women's unequal childrearing responsibilities. Hays (1996) argues that all women face cultural expectations to engage in "intensive mothering." These cultural beliefs are described as cognitively, emotionally, and normatively powerful (Blair-Loy 2003).

But this is not the only explanation for why we might observe differences in parenting behavior by class and by gender. An alternative explanation focuses not on culture, but on constraints. Some studies assert that parents of different social classes actually have similar ideas about good parenting, but poor and working class parents lack the time and money to enact them (Bennett, Lutz, and Jayaram 2012; Chin and Phillips 2004; Hays 1996). Similarly, Gerson (2010) suggests that egalitarian ideals for shared

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involvement in parenting and paid work have become widespread, but are hard to realize because of rigid institutions such as inflexible workplaces, and a lack of affordable, high quality child care.

Contributions: Because of methodological issues, we lack compelling evidence supporting the cultural explanation. This vignette survey experiment addresses important gaps in the literature and advances theory by directly testing hypotheses about cultural beliefs, evaluating when and how class and gender matter in defining good parenting. The study takes advantage of a nationally representative sample to generalize to the population, directly measures cultural beliefs, operationalizes multiple parenting approaches, aligns those parenting approaches with theory, assesses results across parenting domains, and evaluates gender and class differences in parenting attitudes using the same sample and outcome measure.

Measures: Vignettes are constructed to test hypotheses about class differences in “cultural logics of childrearing” and gendered cultural expectations of “intensive mothering.” Vignette content in Table 1 reflects parenting domains and class distinctions described by Lareau (2003). Regardless of parent gender, middle class parents are theorized to prefer a more labor-intensive *concerted cultivation* approach, coordinating children’s many organized activities, using reasoning and negotiation, and promoting active participation in institutions. In contrast, poor and working class parents are said to prefer the *accomplishment of natural growth*, allowing children long stretches of unstructured leisure, using directives backed up with threats of physical punishment, and deferring to professionals in institutions. Importantly, Hays (1996) and Lareau (2003) both argue that experts have shifted in their recommendations and have reached a consensus in promoting intensive childrearing methods. Therefore, considerable overlap exists between concerted cultivation and “intensive mothering” behaviors.

Table 1: Content by Childrearing Approach and Domain

	Concerted Cultivation	Natural Growth
Organization of Daily Life	Structured, Parental Involvement	Unstructured, Child Autonomy
Language Use	Reasoning, Negotiation	Directives, Physical Discipline
Interactions with Institutions	Active, Interventionist	Passive, Deferential

Research Design: Respondents are randomly assigned to evaluate 6 short vignettes² reflecting either more intensive parenting behaviors (*concerted cultivation*) or less intensive parenting behaviors (*natural growth*). I experimentally manipulate whether respondents evaluate mothers or fathers using first names, and whether the child described in the vignette is a son or a daughter. Vignette parent gender is a between-subject manipulation, and child gender varies within-subjects but across vignettes. Because respondents evaluate *other parents*, their evaluations are not subject to resource constraints such as income, and we can directly test cultural hypotheses that ideas about good parenting vary by respondent class, and that they depend on the gender of the parent being evaluated.³

Hypotheses: If middle class respondents share a commitment to concerted cultivation, and poor and working class respondents see natural growth as the most appropriate parenting approach, manipulating vignette parent gender should be relatively inconsequential:

H1A: Middle class respondents will rate concerted cultivation (more intensive) parenting approaches more favorably than poor and working class respondents.

H1B: Poor and working class respondents will rate natural growth (less intensive) parenting approaches more favorably than middle class respondents.

Consistent with social psychological research on stereotypes and shifting standards (Bridges, Etaugh, and Barnes-Farrell 2002; Deutsch and Saxon 1998), vignette fathers performing more intensive parenting behaviors (*concerted cultivation*) should be rated more favorably than vignette mothers (Biernat and Kobryniewicz 1997) for going beyond expectations. And when vignette mothers violate prescriptive norms of intensive mothering by doing less intensive parenting (*natural growth*), respondents should penalize them more than vignette fathers (Rudman and Fairchild 2004), regardless of respondent class:

H2A: Vignette fathers will be rated more favorably than vignette mothers for concerted cultivation (more intensive) parenting approaches.

H2B: Vignette fathers will be rated more favorably than vignette mothers for natural growth (less intensive) parenting approaches.

² A multiple vignette design improves robustness and the ability to assess when and how class and gender matter.

³ Although there is evidence that parents treat sons and daughters differently (Lareau 2003; Lundberg, McLanahan, and Rose 2007), the experimental manipulation of primary theoretical interest is parent gender.

While the class reproduction literature predicts that respondent social class will be most critical in shaping ideas about appropriate parenting, the gender stratification literature implies a different prediction that respondent characteristics should matter much less than the gender of the vignette parent.

Outcome Variable and Analyses: The outcome variable involves respondents' evaluations of the parenting behavior described in each vignette.

What do you think of [Name]'s parenting behavior in this situation? Would you say it is excellent, very good, good, OK, not very good, or poor?

Because the outcome is ordinal, I use ordered logistic regression to test hypotheses about differences across experimental conditions, and across subgroups defined by measures of socioeconomic status.

Pretest and Pilot Test: Iterative pretests were performed with quantitative and qualitative elements (N=200), and I am currently conducting a pilot test (N=500) using parent respondents from Amazon Mechanical Turk. Initial pretesting probed qualitative aspects of the vignettes with open-ended responses, and subsequent pretests assessed whether vignettes effectively reflect theory. Pretests show that both concerted cultivation and natural growth vignettes do effectively reflect theorized differences.

Final Data Collection: By December 2014, I will have the full study data collected on a nationally representative sample of parents. Using a large, nationally representative sample will permit inferences about patterns in the population. The study data will be collected by the survey company GfK, which uses address-based sampling and maintains a respondent panel that is nationally representative of the adult population in the United States. I'm submitting a proposal to Time-Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS), which fully funds population-based survey experiments that are accepted. If TESS agrees to field the proposal, I can use research grants to oversample lower-income respondents. If TESS does not accept the proposal, I have enough funding from an NSF Doctoral Dissertation Research Improvement Grant, Mathematica Policy Research, the Office of Population Research, the Princeton Department of Sociology, and the Princeton Center for the Study of Social Organization to pay GfK directly to field the study on a nationally representative sample. This study has received IRB approval.

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