Parenting agendas: an empirical study of intensive mothering and infant cognitive development

Abstract:

Intensive parenting debates reflect the critical importance of a child's early years, and parents' roles in determining later developmental outcomes. Mothers are usually assigned primary responsibility for facilitating their infants' cognitive development through adequate and appropriate sensory stimulation. Drawing on Foucault's technologies of the self we explore how new mothers shape their mothering practices in order to provide appropriately stimulating interactions. Using findings from 64 interviews (31 women were interviewed twice, 2 women were interviewed only once) we identify three main positions whereby mothers function in relation to their infants' development; mother as committed facilitator, creative provider and careful/caring monitor. We consider the perceived normative nature of these positions and the impact they can have on middle-class women's subjectivities as new mothers. Our study of parental agendas and infant cognitive development suggests that a continued focus on the mother's role within early infant development reflects and upholds ideologies of child-centred, intensive mothering, which risks precluding 'alternative' maternal subjectivities and promotes conservative feminine identities.

Key words: transition to motherhood, intensive mothering, child development, technologies of the self

Introduction

Parenting and family life remain high on the agenda for the UK government, yet in recent years the focus of policy around the family has shifted. Scholars have noted an increased

emphasis on interventions and strategies that explicitly target and seek to change parenting behaviour in order to improve child outcomes (Lewis, 2011; Macvarish, 2014). Advances in developmental psychology, particularly neuropsychology, have informed these policies, putting the onus on parents to ensure that the way that they interact with their child enables optimal developmental outcomes (Allen, 2011; Allen and Duncan-Smith, 2008). Drawing on Foucault's (1988) technologies of the self, we explore the ways in which new mothers in England self-monitor and shape their conduct and behaviour to optimise their infants' cognitive development. Moreover, using the findings from our longitudinal study of intensive mothering, within the context of the transition to parenthood, we outline how the discourse of early infant development reflects and upholds ideologies of child-centred, intensive mothering, which continue to preclude 'alternative' maternal subjectivities, foregrounding conservative feminine identities.

Social policy and child development

Theories of child development have influenced family and educational policy for the last few decades (Rose, 1999). In the UK context, Macvarish (2014) notes that over the past twenty years there has been increasing political focus on early childhood. In 2012 a three-year trial of 'universal parenting classes' began for parents of children under five (DFE, 2014a) and school children aged four-seven now receive free school dinners (DFE, 2014b). Entitlement to free childcare has been successively extended and includes all three and four year olds and disadvantaged two year olds (DFE, 2014c). These initiatives reflect clear concerns regarding how (some) parents interact with and, effectively, 'parent' their children in the early years and an 'increasing intensity of the government of childhood', Parton (2006, p.187). Successive UK governments have effectively provided templates for how parenting *should* be done which Gillies (2005) suggests are designed to enable working-class parents to raise middle-class children.

Policy emphasises parents' roles in shaping their interactions with infants so that they are able to achieve optimal developmental outcomes (Allen, 2011; Allen and Duncan-Smith, 2008). In practice, parental demands have tended to fall disproportionately on mothers. Since the 1960s, mothers have been increasingly involved in the early pre-school education of their children and the maximizing of their children's cognitive development. In response to evidence linking poorer child developmental outcomes with family circumstances, mothers have been recruited to break the 'cycle of deprivation' by applying theories of developmental psychology in the home (Rose, 1999). This solution involved professionals defining the norms associated with good mothering and implanting these into an aspirational maternal identity that mothers could then enact in the privacy of the family home (Rose, 1999). As a result, women's roles in the education and socialisation of children became integral to the identity and behaviour of 'good' mothers, shaping maternal practices and subjectivities.

Current advice emphasises the importance of providing infants with adequate sensory stimulation (Wall, 2004). This is reflected in the UK government's recent policy documentation on early intervention (Allen, 2011; Allen & Duncan-Smith, 2008) which, in highlighting the importance of the early years (0-3), draws on evidence which suggests early experiences determine infants' future emotional, intellectual and physical development. Allen frames the early years as a period containing 'exceptional opportunities, *especially for mothers*, to provide children with the social and emotional foundations that are the key to personal development' (Allen, 2011, p.24, emphasis ours), highlighting the gendered nature of this responsibility. Wall (2004) argues that the importance placed on provision of adequate sensory stimulation in the early months and years of a child's life encourages mothers to conform to an ideology of 'intensive motherhood' (Hays, 1996).

Intensive motherhood

Coined by Hays (1996), the term 'intensive motherhood' was developed to define what she saw as a new emerging ideology of motherhood whereby 'the methods of appropriate child-rearing are constructed as '*child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour intensive, and financially expensive'* (Hays, 1996, p.8, emphasis in original).

Intensive mothering has been viewed as part of a contemporary neoliberal rationality (Shirani, Henwood and Coltart, 2012; Wall, 2010), which emphasises individual responsibility, risk management, self-surveillance and control. In the light of social policy which explicitly stipulates how women 'should' parent, women are positioned as responsible for making the 'right' parenting decisions - those which will lead to the best developmental outcomes for their children.

It has been argued that the ideology of 'intensive motherhood' sets women up to fail by demanding unrealistic standards of motherhood that women are often unable to reach (Douglas and Michaels, 2004). Moreover, in keeping with a postfeminist era, intensive mothering foregrounds conservative femininities; it 'redefines women, first and foremost, through their relationships to children' (Douglas and Michaels, 2004, p.162). Women who wish to occupy the position of the 'good mother' should stay at home (Gorman and Fritzsche, 2002), the alternative is said to leave women with feelings of guilt for spending time away from children, and without the necessary energy to compete with men for high status and highly paid jobs (Hays, 1996). In short intensive mothering ideology is one means of maintaining women's subordinate position in relation to men (Hays, 1996).

Intensive mothering and cognitive development

Within a framework of intensive motherhood, the early months of a baby's life are understood as an important window of opportunity to give babies a developmental 'head start' (Furedi, 2008). Research is increasingly recognising the role mothers are assigned in

ensuring optimal cognitive development through sensory stimulation. Wall (2004) argues that this expands the demands placed upon mothers and encourages them to conform to a model of intensive parenting: 'It is now not only children's emotional and psychological well-being that are at stake if parents neglect to spend adequate time with their children, but also their full potential in terms of brain development' (Wall, 2004, p. 45). Accordingly, the minutiae of parenting practices, such as physically caring for and playing with babies became repackaged as unmissable opportunities to stimulate and educate in order to facilitate cognitive development (Rose, 1999; Wall, 2004). Nadesan (2002) discusses the popularization of brain science and the way in which it presents a formula to parents who want their children to exceed intellectual expectations by providing the right kinds of stimulation. Furthermore, it is evident that this endeavour is being capitalised on. A recent analysis of a parenting publication in Australia highlighted the advertising of 'enrichment' activities targeted at preschool children, which exhorted parents to invest in the education of their children in order to give them a competitive advantage (Smyth, 2015). This approach has been criticised for overstating the level of intervention needed for normal development, making parenting 'impossibly burdensome' (Furedi, 2002, p.45) and described as deterministic (Furedi, 2008) in that it is said to have both immediate and long-term effects, shaping not only their immediate developmental progress, but their futures. This leads to a parenting culture where the stakes are high and even minor considerations of child rearing are taken out of the private family sphere and become 'the subject of intensive debates about the effects of parental activities for the next generation and society as a whole' (Lee, Macvarish and Bristow, 2010, p.294).

Regulating the good, intensive mother

Rose (1999) considers the shaping of subjectivities to have become a means through which family life is 'intensively governed'. Knowledge is transmitted to parents about the

importance of focusing on the cognitive development of their infants and this encourages self-monitoring and self-governing as well as self-surveillance and self-regulation of mothering practices. To use Foucault's term, this may constitute a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1988), which allows individuals:

> '…to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' (1988, p.18).

Foucault posited that the relationship between the 'technologies of domination' and 'technologies of the self' should be analysed with regards to how people are 'governed' and also the agency with which individuals shape and regulate themselves.

Drawing on Foucault's technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988) we consider the ways in which new mothers regulate themselves, focusing in particular on the technologies middle-class women employ with respect to one of the central tenets of intensive motherhood: that mothers ought to provide continuous stimulation for their infants in order to facilitate optimal cognitive development.

A series of academic studies have already considered the impact of intensive parenting ideology and the emphasis on adequate stimulation of older and pre-school children in developed societies (Caputo, 2007; Chin, 2000; Lareau, 2002; Lupton, 2011; Romagnoli and Wall, 2012; Wall, 2010). Our focus here is on the experiences of a group of middle-class women in the UK during the first few months of motherhood. Whilst the imperative to parent intensively has been described as normative (Arendell, 2000) and as cutting across class boundaries (Hays, 1996), others identify intensive mothering as primarily reflecting middle-class ideals of parenting (Lareau, 2002). A study of low income women found some

alignment of intensive mothering and cognitive development discourse, yet also highlighted some resistance, with scepticism about the validity of the intensive approach and the extent to which it is good for children, as well as citing practical economic and time constraints as barriers to a continual focus on child development (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012). However, given that intensive motherhood is widely accepted as equating to good motherhood for middle class women (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012), we focus on how middle class women both align with, and resist messages about, the importance of infant stimulation and cognitive development.

Our interest in the experience of women with young babies stems from the fact that in the first few months of a baby's life the majority of parenting tasks are concerned with the physical care of babies, before they become more independently interactive. It is also a time when new mothers are adapting to the practicalities of looking after their babies, before they become more comfortable and settled in their new roles (Miller, 2005). Concerns of mothers about whether or not they are adequately stimulating their babies and meeting their cognitive development needs may place additional stress and pressure upon women during this difficult transition phase.

Method

Thirty-three women participated in the study; and were aged between 25 and 41 when first interviewed. Twenty-three were married or in a civil partnership; the remaining 10 were in a partnership or co-habiting; all of the informants were in heterosexual relationships aside from three women who were in lesbian relationships. The majority of the informants were white British (26), in addition there was one British-Asian participant, and one woman from each of the following countries: USA; Japan; Portugal; Finland; France and Spain. The women were all socially positioned as middle class in terms of their occupation, level of education and

access to economic, social and cultural capital. Participants were recruited through a combination of opportunistic and snowball sampling methods, as well as via recruitment advertisements placed on a local parenting website and in retail outlets. Thirty-one of the participants were interviewed twice for the study; once during the third trimester of pregnancy, and once during the first few months of motherhood, when they were usually still on maternity leave. Two participants were only interviewed once, thereby generating 64 interviews altogether[1].

Although we used an approximate topic guide for both interviews, these were very loosely structured. The main focus was on the informants' feelings about becoming a mother, pregnancy, labour and birth, early weeks and months of mothering, infant feeding, maternal identity, and consumption; there were no specific questions related either to infant stimulation or to maternal guilt, and the term intensive mothering was not used (nor was it used by any participants). Prior to interviewing, all participants were briefed about the broad nature and aims of the study (experiences of first time motherhood) so that they were able to give fully informed consent. The Participant Information Sheet also outlined what participation would involve, the principles of confidentiality and anonymity, and informants' right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants received a shopping voucher as a token of gratitude, following each interview. The interviews ranged between 45 minutes to two hours in length, with the average being 90 minutes, and all took place within informants' homes. The interviewer was an experienced woman researcher who had children and had recently returned to employment. While we did not seek to evaluate participants' views, we cannot guarantee that some self-presentation issues were not present within the interviews– even if unspoken. The field notes written up by the researcher post-interview did not, however, suggest this was an issue.

All interviews were audio recorded, after which they were transcribed verbatim. Then interviews were read and re-read by the research team to establish familiarity with the data set, before being coded in NVivo in order to establish potential themes or topics. There was constant iteration across the research team in order to agree on coding, themes and conceptualization from the findings; but there were no formal processes of inter-rater comparison. The data under consideration for this paper were those extracts that were coded as examples of 'good' or 'intensive' mothering, as well as extracts that constituted potential forms of resistance or renegotiation of these 'ideals'. Note that none of our respondents used the specific term: intensive parenting; and there was no discussion of or comparison with their partners' attitudes towards intensive parenting. The analysis of this data was informed by a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis (Willig, 2013), which considered both the discourses of good motherhood in addition to the subject positions that these discourses made available. Further, the implications of these discourses for women's subjectivities or 'ways of being', and practices – what they can, or perhaps 'ought' to do – were considered.

Intensively mothering towards infant development

This is one of the few longitudinal studies of parenthood to elicit insights about parental agendas and infant cognitive development in the early stages of motherhood. The mothers placed importance upon 'stimulating' and 'entertaining' their babies, and thereby adopted an important tenet of intensive mothering. We identify three (overlapping) approaches that women take in positioning themselves as responsible for their child's cognitive development (see figure 1). These approaches encompass a variety of means to stimulate infants, including continually talking to them, through to singing and playing musical instruments ('mother as committed facilitator') and giving their babies interactive toys ('mother as creative provider'). Some women also adopted the 'mother as careful/caring monitor' role at points where they were not able to directly meet all their baby's developmental needs first hand. We

describe each approach and consider how intensive mothering - towards infant development - is woven into women's subjectivities as an expected practice of new mothers, and the consequent implications of these expectations, often in the shape of guilt for those mothers who feel they cannot meet these expectations. We consider how women's shaping of their interactions with their infants constitutes a technology of the self, as they shape their practices in line with the expected norms of contemporary maternal behaviour.

Figure 1: Intensively mothering towards infant development
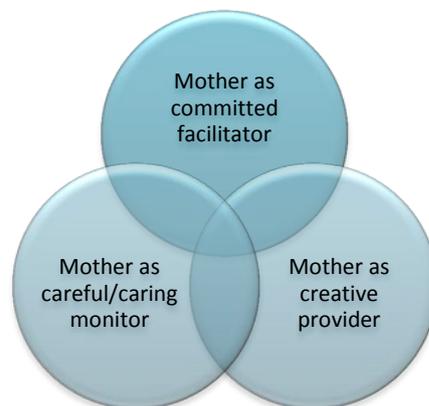
It should be noted that a focus on early infant development and taking on the overlapping roles of committed facilitator, creative provider and careful/caring monitor was experienced as mandatory for some of the women – thus woven into their maternal identity. This had implications for women's subjectivities and experiences as new mothers as they grappled with meeting the perceived demands. Cally (25) felt that she should not have time to herself; 'I feel a bit like I should be doing stuff with Olivia really'. Expressions of guilt emerged when women discussed the difficulties of constantly stimulating and entertaining their children all day. Kimberley (32) considered the tension between being a mother and also feeling the need to complete housework: 'if I do get on with the housework and just leave

him to sit I feel guilty about that…I feel like I ought to be entertaining him and being a mother to him all the time'. Guilt also features in Carla's (29) account:

> It is a long day, yeah, it is a long day. And I feel guilty when I've just got her lying there on her mat. She's quite happy actually she's not a baby that needs entertaining all the time. She's quite happy to just sit with her toys on her mat and just kick around. But I do feel quite…like I'm neglecting her if I'm not entertaining her all the time, so it is quite full on.

Carla's example is indicative of morality being tied to this aspect of intensive motherhood. As noted by Lupton (2011), expressions of guilt often signal having 'done wrong' or having flouted a social convention, thus indicating the social expectations placed upon women to intensively mother. This also demonstrates the problematic nature of the ideology of intensive motherhood and the potential impact that these discourses, which define what women ought to do to make 'good' mothers, may have on women's subjectivities. In Carla's account we can note her tendency to feel as if she is 'neglecting' her daughter when she leaves her side for very brief periods, rendering visible the power this discourse has to shape women's feelings of not being 'good enough' mothers. We will now set out each of the three approaches women take in positioning themselves as responsible for their child's cognitive development in more detail.

Mother as Committed Facilitator

The mothers placed great importance on 'stimulating' and 'entertaining' their infants as a means of facilitating their cognitive development. Some of our informants discussed taking their babies to classes specifically designed to stimulate, entertain and educate infants, such as baby sign language, baby swim, and baby massage, demonstrating their engagement with

enrichment activities (Smyth, 2015). For many women, adopting these facilitating behaviours was central to how they wanted to 'do mothering'.

> In terms of just loving, cuddling and spoiling and spending lots of time entertaining and stimulating him, I would say that I'm doing what I intended to do. (Sally, 29)

Sally's use of the word 'just' here downplays these actions as anything particularly remarkable, instead suggesting these actions are rudimentary to the requirements of motherhood. Sally's comments illustrate the way in which early stimulation has become a normative expectation of 'good' parenting. In signalling that these practices form part of what 'she intended to do' as a mother, she hints at a subjective maternal self that she aspired to even prior to the birth of her baby. It could be argued that contemporary (expanded) understandings of what babies need, specifically the importance attached to early infant stimulation have been implanted into a maternal identity she wanted to aspire to. Another participant, Vicky (32), discussed how despite never singing in public, or even in front of her husband, she adapts and makes an exception for her daughter because she 'wanted to make sure that you know, she's got lots of stimulation and communication'. Both Sally and Vicky are engaged in a degree of reflexivity and demonstrate awareness of the kinds of practices they 'want' and 'intend' to engage in as mothers. This 'technology of the self' involves self-regulating their conduct in accordance with a desired, yet also expected maternal self; aligning their maternal identities and practices with the prescribed contemporary normative standards of good parenting.

Many women linked the importance of directly communicating and stimulating their babies with facilitating the cognitive development of their infants. As they understood it, taking time to stimulate babies (e.g. talking and singing) would enhance and accelerate their baby's learning and development. Annie (31) describes how she 'spend[s] all day playing with him

and trying to get him to *develop*' and her annoyance at her husband who 'sticks' their baby 'in front of the telly' and who does not provide what she perceives as appropriately stimulating interactions. Liz (36) describes how she explains to her baby what they are doing throughout the day because 'it's really important to explain to them what's going on…that's how she's going to grow up knowing stuff'. This signals that for the 'good' parent, merely taking care of infants is insufficient. Instead, the potential to facilitate and accelerate cognitive development within these interactions should be capitalised on. As such, the women self-govern their maternal practices and monitor their interactions with their infants in accordance with current understandings of children's needs. The everyday tasks of motherhood, including activities such as playing with the baby, picking the baby up, and dressing the baby become reframed as opportunities to facilitate the stimulation and development of their infants (Lee, Macvarish and Bristow, 2010; Faircloth, 2014). Furthermore, the mothers in our study believed there were long term developmental consequences of not making the most of these opportunities to facilitate stimulation, thus monitoring carefully the opportunities provided by a variety of apparently mundane activities.

> I don't want him to become a baby that will or a child even that just watches TV or goes on to play Playstations and things. So it's really important that he's sung to, that he's talked to, that all the different things that we've bought for him, he, I use and he's stimulated with colours and sounds and textures. (Sally, 29)

Sally's account reflects the notion of parental determinism (Furedi, 2002); she positions herself as responsible for ensuring that her child does not become reliant on television or video games. Sally describes the importance of preventing these unfavourable outcomes by singing, talking and using objects of different colours and with varied sounds and textures to stimulate him with. Her active role as a facilitator is indicated - 'he's talked to…he's stimulated' – and she regulates her interactions according to assumptions about

what will achieve the best outcome for her infant; by implication the unfavourable outcome is a 'passive' child.

Mother as creative provider

Aside from the stimulation through 'appropriate' interactions, some mothers spoke of their responsibility as creative providers. Women turned to consumer culture in order to provide toys which would encourage and optimise stimulation and learning in their infants.

> A lot of the toys she seems to lose interest in them in seconds…so I feel like I need to sort of prepare and get some stuff for that next stage really. (Cally, 25)

Similarly, Claire (33) stressed the importance of having interactive toys for her baby, dismissing the 'soft' toys she has been given as gifts as inappropriate for babies who 'want interactive things' and in the following extract Megan discusses the importance of activities which foster infant development.

> I think we'd be happier if she (mother in-law) came to our house and looked after him there, just because she's been looking after his cousins and the house is just…her house is just full of toys and I just…there's no colouring pens and paper, there's nothing for a child to actually create for themselves, it's all there for them. It's all…I don't know, all the toys seem to…they're no longer interactive; you press a button and it does it all for you. And it just feels…we want him to sort of make his own play and use his own mind for things. Megan (29)

Here Megan delineates the importance of infants engaging in activities that are interactive and creative, again implying the negative outcome of a passive child. As such, we can see these women monitoring their children's development and adapting their interactions as well

as the tools they use to mediate these interactions in order to achieve optimal developmental outcomes (Nadesan, 2002).

Eleanor (31), a lesbian parent[2], discusses the pressure some mothers experience to monitor these interactions and provide appropriate tools:

> I think a lot of mothers that I've talked to worry about whether their babies are getting enough stimulation. It's like if I give him this toy as opposed to this one, will it develop their cerebral cortex or something?.. I don't know. I think in the sense that I'm not in the same position as a biological mother who is the primary carer or a mother who has a child that didn't bear it but is the primary carer, I'm in a different position, in that it's not…the expectation is not on me to provide that stimulus for the child.

Eleanor surmises that not being her child's birth mother allows her partial exemption from this pressure; she is not seen as the primary carer. However, using the provision of suitable toys as an example, she highlights the concern that many women have about providing enough stimulation for their infants: 'It's like if I give him this toy as opposed to this one, will it develop their cerebral cortex or something?' As such, use of appropriate toys and activities are specifically linked to the brain and cognitive development of infants and Eleanor hints at the anxiety experienced by women who find themselves checking that they are providing appropriately stimulating interactions.

In contrast, other participants contested the importance of toys, again emphasising their role as facilitator.

I don't feel inclined to rush out and buy every toy…I think actually what the baby enjoys most is when I talk to him or sing to him or when someone's interacting with him. (Camille, 37)

I just want to keep it as simple as possible really and have that activity to stimulate as well rather than relying on some mechanical thing…I mean, the whole point of taking maternity leave I think is to have that interactivity. (Jenny, 37)

Although these mothers question the role of toys, they nonetheless indicate self-regulation of their conduct in order to meet their children's perceived needs. Camille suggests that what her baby really enjoys, or requires, are the interactions mothers can supply. Similarly, Jenny constructs an active maternal role implying that reliance on toys indicates idleness or a lack of commitment to parenting and further defines the purpose of maternity leave primarily in terms of fostering stimulating interactions with infants. Early infant stimulation becomes woven into the 'good mother' subject position, with women regulating their interactions in order to facilitate the best outcome for their infant. By contrast, 'mediated' interactions are constructed as not in the best interests of infants, and represent resistance to the consumption of infant development toys that claim to optimise developmental outcomes (Nadesan, 2002).

Mother as careful/caring monitor

Most of the mothers in our study planned to return to work; although some planned to return part- rather than full-time in order to spend time with their baby and/or to reduce some of the pressures on family life (compared with having both parents working full time). An important element of discussion concerned childcare, and investigating the different types of care offered by child minders and nurseries. All informants had clear ideas about what they wanted for their baby in childcare. While these intentions differed across the mothers, the

careful homework involved in investigating the different types of care was a common feature of much of their planning for their return to work. The role of careful/caring monitor becomes salient when women are unable to directly facilitate development; such as when they consider returning to work and placing their babies in the care of others. In line with Christopher's (2012) findings, mothers returning to the workplace delegated the immediate, day-to-day responsibilities for primary care whilst retaining more strategic responsibility for the organizational arrangements, in order to ensure their children's ultimate well-being.

While there is a danger that childcare could disrupt the kinds of practices women have been performing with their children at home and interrupt a model of intensive, full-time motherhood, some women in the sample reflected on the benefits of nursery care on child development thus framing this decision in positive terms for the child's social and emotional development. Jenny (37) describes nursery as 'good for that social scene' and Sarah (35) describes her preference for putting her baby into nursery over being taken care of by his grandparents, which might not 'give him what he needs…in terms of social development sort of thing'. Thus, although not directly facilitating their development, these mothers delineate the importance of monitoring and overseeing the overall development of their infants.

For Martha (36), her role as child development monitor involved an extensive search for the 'right' nursery that she believed would mirror the approach to childrearing she was keen to adopt:

> …the way they seem to focus on the child [in the nursery] are the ways that we
> feel most comfortable with in the respects that it would be most like the way we
> would bring up the child if we were doing it…So in that respect I'm saying it's a
> gut instinct sort of thing because you've gone in there and you've seen the way

the children are and they've really they really seem to know about how to sort of like develop certain skills, not just numerical, mathematical or written, verbal communication skills sort of things, but they do lots of other little things that some of the other nurseries didn't seem to have any grip on at all.

Martha's choice of nursery requires selecting one that most closely resembles her parenting approach. Although she is unable to facilitate her child's development directly, Martha oversees her infant's cognitive development through monitoring the interactions she is exposed to elsewhere. We might consider this a re-framing of intensive mothering in common with Christopher (2012, p.91) whose employed mothers constructed 'the good, employed mother as more "extensive" than "intensive"'. Her investment of time and allocation of resources benefits the child and resonates with intensive forms of parenting. A similar strategy was adopted by Canadian mothers in Caputo's (2007) research, where mothers fulfilled the role of intensive mothers by sending children to private schools, which, they believed, would mean that their children would be educated in a safe, home-like environment and by teachers who, as one participant described, are 'as caring as mothers' (Caputo, 2007, p.178).

Challenging intensive motherhood approaches to infant development

Throughout the corpus there were very few direct challenges to the ideology of intensive motherhood in relation to the importance of constant infant stimulation. Despite her earlier admission that she felt 'guilty' for leaving her baby 'unentertained' even for brief periods, one such 'challenge' came from Carla (29). Here, she negotiates the value of the 'mother as facilitator' approach through providing a counter discourse that 'too much' stimulation could be of little benefit and is perhaps detrimental to her baby:

I have this thing that I should be…that a good mum is someone who kind of stimulates their child and does lots of things with them and interacts with them all the time. But you can't…I think that's something that I'm learning, that you can't 24 hours be…and it's knackering for them if you're…you know, she gets really irritated if she's had a day when we've had…like when my mum and dad are here or when Matt's parents here obviously they're making a big fuss of her all the time, she gets totally over-stimulated and over-tired.

Carla equates 'over stimulation' with 'over tiredness', which causes her infant to become irritable. Through this counter discourse she questions the extent to which such an intensive focus on infant stimulation, as advocated in the 'mother as committed facilitator' approach, is beneficial and realistic. Whilst this might seem to challenge discourses of intensive motherhood, it is nevertheless expressed in terms of what is 'best for the baby', rather than on the admission that it is difficult for her to maintain. This careful framing of the difficulties associated with intensive mothering reflect the problematic or sensitive nature of this admission. A perhaps more successful resistance to the imperative towards intensive mothering and concerns over infant stimulation and development came from Karen (34), who constructed this discourse in terms of a potential threat to her identity:

I think I'm scared of becoming just a mother, just my identity being subsumed by becoming a mother…I get overwhelmed by trying to remember everything that you're supposed to do with the baby and its developmental stages and how you're supposed to facilitate its greatest development and things like that and so part of it is not wanting to kind of awaken loads of anxiety, but also it's a bit boring. I find it a bit boring…But then that makes you feel like a really terrible person that you know…again I think the discourse of child rearing is that you really should put

yourself and your desires and your needs and your interests to one side and everything should be baby oriented and I don't feel like that. That makes me sound like I don't care about bringing the baby up but I do, I really do care about that, but not to the exclusion of everything else.

Here, Karen speaks of the difficulties of reconciling the many tasks involved in good, intensive mothering with the wish to retain some of her individual identity. Karen's account highlights the perceived imperative for women to mother 'exclusively' (Wolf, 2007) and the expectation placed upon new mothers to entirely absorb themselves in pursuit of their infants' 'greatest development'. This is reflective of the expectations placed upon women to engage in a technology of the self - to act upon themselves and shape their subjectivities and practices in accordance with contemporary norms and expectations of motherhood. To some extent, Karen resists this yet she acknowledges the implications her resistance has for both how it might make her appear to others (i.e. self-monitoring), as well as for her own subjectivity. She remarks that it 'makes you feel like a really terrible person' and 'that makes me sound like I don't care about bringing the baby up' thus hinting at the feelings of guilt mothers can experience at not being able to meet the ever-expanding requirements of 'good' motherhood. Karen indicates that in disallowing their identity to be subsumed by motherhood women may be perceived as 'not caring', and, by implication, as being a 'bad mother', thus revealing something about the difficulties associated with managing these two competing positions: the self, and the 'good' intensive middle-class mother. These findings are similar to those of Perrier (2012) who found that middle class mothers seemed caught between resisting and complying with the demands of intensive motherhood.

Conclusion

An important tenet of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) is the practice of continual infant stimulation and this is indicative of an expansion in the role of the mother (Furedi, 2008). From our longitudinal study of transition to parenthood where we captured novel findings about women's lived experience of intensive mothering, we outline three main (potentially overlapping) positionings occupied by women in attempts to demonstrate their allegiance to this agenda; mother as committed facilitator, creative provider and careful/caring monitor.

Firstly as committed facilitators, women identified a responsibility to regulate their own behaviour in order to provide appropriately stimulating interactions for their infants, often transforming 'banal' acts of caregiving into opportunities for stimulation and entertainment. Secondly women acted as creative providers, ensuring their infants had access to appropriate toys to aid their cognitive development. Finally, some women positioned themselves as careful/caring monitors – tasked to oversee their child's development at times when they were unable to directly facilitate it. These women described how performing associated practices enabled the development of positive outcomes, reflecting assumptions behind parental determinism and brain development discourse (O'Connor and Joffe, 2012). As such we can see the clear impact that discourses surrounding the importance of continual infant stimulation have on these new mothers as they engage in a technology of the self (Foucault, 1988); self-monitoring, disciplining and acting upon themselves and shaping their maternal behaviours in order to meet these now normative societal expectations.

For some women the expectation to mother 'intensively' (in this case facilitating cognitive development) was experienced as mandatory, signalling the mainstreaming of this requirement of 'good' parenting, particularly among middle-class mothers (Hays, 1996). An unwelcome implication is that the early stimulation of babies becomes a moral project, demonstrated by the guilt expressed by some women when they felt unable to meet the requirements of continual infant stimulation. As noted by Lupton (2011), expressions of guilt

reflect instances where individuals consider themselves to have flouted social norms and conventions and marks out intensive mothering as a norm and requirement that women are expected to fulfil, signalled by the accounting work that needs to be done when these norms and expectations are not adhered to. For the women who internalised the discourse surrounding the importance of early infant stimulation, the requirements posed by this discourse are demonstrably restrictive of women's practices since they were perceived as mandatory. These restrictions also applied to the women's subjectivities – doubts that they were meeting these ever expanding requirements led them to question whether they could occupy the subject position of the 'good' mother.

Our participants' babies were on average between three and four months old by the time of the second interview; therefore, concerns about providing children with appropriately stimulating environments and interactions were expressed very early on in the transition to motherhood. This is a difficult stage during the transition to motherhood – a time where women are developing confidence in their parenting abilities and 'becoming the expert' (Miller, 2005, p.112). Self-policing with regards to the optimising of their babies' developmental outcomes may place additional pressure on women seeking to achieve the already challenging tasks of early motherhood.

The mandate to parent in the 'right' way may be conceptualised as a form of governmentality (Foucault, 1991), whereby individual mothers are positioned as active, with the capacity for self-surveillance and self-adjustment of their parental practices (Rose, 1999). Crucially, women are rendered responsible and accountable for child outcomes that are associated with these practices or ways of parenting. Rose (1999) argues that the family are 'intensively governed' through the promotion of certain kinds of subjectivities and the activation of certain emotions (such as the guilt expressed by the women in this study), when there exists a discrepancy between self-scrutiny of actual family interactions and practices and the familial

practices that are expected or defined as normative. We suggest that the self-discipline apparent in women's accounts is indicative of what Foucault (1988) conceptualised as a 'technology of the self'. These women could be seen to 'act upon themselves', shaping their conduct to align themselves with discourses of intensive mothering and, as such, bring their practices and subjectivities 'into alliance with the aspirations of authorities' (Rose, 1996: 160).

We argue that intensive mothering discourses, and the recent social policy around early intervention that upholds them, are characteristic of postfeminist discourses. They reflect a return to more conservative feminine identities (Negra, 2009), and may represent a potential threat to women's subjectivities outside the domestic, particularly given the 'intensive' nature of this motherhood 'ideal' (Badinter, 2013). Both the intensive mothering ideology and the notion of parental determinism uphold the gendered division of labour, by positioning women not only as the primary carers for young babies, but also responsible for their developmental outcomes. Additionally, an individualist approach, whereby a child's developmental potential is viewed as an outcome of the parent's relationship and interaction with that child, is problematic. It effectively diffuses the impact wider society has on children's futures – such as social inequality and access to services and resources (O'Connor and Joffe, 2012; Macvarish, 2014).

We have contributed to understandings of contemporary parenting culture in the shape of intensive mothering and considered the implications for middle-class women's experiences and subjectivities as new mothers. We found limited challenges to discourses of intensive motherhood in terms of the emphasis on the importance of infant stimulation, and, the occasional pocket of resistance was framed in terms of what is best for the infant, thus enabling women to maintain the subject position of a 'good mother'.

We specifically focused on the experiences of middle class new mothers in the UK and as such our findings may not reflect the experiences of working-class mothers. While prior research in Canada suggests that there could be serious consequences for low income women not adhering to ideals associated with intensive mothering and cognitive development, such as state intervention in parenthood (Romagnoli and Wall, 2012), there is no doubt that a range of Bourdieuian capitals (social, economic, cultural, educational) influenced our mothers' parenting agendas around their interactions with their new babies. For mothers with lower levels of socio-economic resources the opportunities to consume might be more limited, spanning a range of products (e.g. toys, books) and services (e.g. child care, baby yoga). Women drawing on different (and possibly lower) levels of cultural and educational capital and what Skeggs (2011 p.509) termed "different material conditions", would likely face a different set of challenges and possibly different priorities as they mother their new babies, often within more constrained financial resources. Given these different priorities and resources there is likely to be less emphasis on the role of careful/caring monitor within their mothering role and more emphasis on the acquisition of the skills of emotional labour via social connections.

Future research could also explore the extent to which parents who are not 'birth mothers' experience similar pressures. With the emergence of higher numbers of 'alternative' family structures (e.g. lesbian, gay, trans, single, adoptive, surrogacy) and increasing numbers of fathers more visibly involved in early infant care (e.g. facilitated by the Shared Parental Leave policy introduced in the UK in April 2015) it would be interesting to explore whether these discourses hold the same implications for the subjectivities of men and other parents who take on this role.

[1] Two of our participants were partners and completed one of the interviews each, meaning that although we had 33 participants, this resulted in 64 interviews in total.

[2] Eleanor participated in the second interview, her partner having completed the first interview during her pregnancy. Although this mode of participation was not consistent with the other participants, it was what these two women were comfortable with, and we therefore felt it important to include Eleanor's experiences in addition to her partner's.

References:

Allen, G., (2011), *Early Intervention: The Next Steps.* Available at:

http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/early-intervention-next-steps.pdf, (accessed 8 September, 2014).

Allen, G. and Duncan-Smith, I., (2008), *Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens.* Available at: http://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/publications/early-intervention-good-parents-great-kids-better-citizens,* (accessed 8 September, 2014).

Arendell, T., (2000), 'Conceiving and Investigating Motherhood: The Decade's Scholarship', *Journal of Marriage and the Family,* 62 (4): 1192-1207.

Badinter, E., (2013), *The Conflict: How Overzealous Motherhood Undermines the Status of Women*. London: Picador/Pan Macmillan.

Caputo, V., (2007), 'She's From a 'Good Family': Performing Childhood and Motherhood in a Canadian Private School Setting', *Childhood,* 14 (2): 173-192.

Chin, T., (2000), ''Sixth Grade Madness'': Parental Emotion Work in the Private High School Application Process', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography,* 29 (2): 124-163.

Christopher, K., (2012), 'Extensive Mothering: Employed Mothers' Constructions of the Good Mother', *Gender & Society,* 26 (1): 73-96.

DFE (2014a), *CANparent Trial Evaluation: Final Report*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/canparent-trial-evaluation-final-report, (accessed 1 September 2014)

DFE (2014b), *Universal Infant Free School Meals.* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/universal-infant-free-school-meals, (accessed 1 September 2014)

DFE (2014c), *Improving the Quality and Range of Education and Childcare from Birth to 5 Years (Policy).* Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-quality-and-range-of-education-and-childcare-from-birth-to-5-years, (accessed 11 January 2016)

Douglas, S. and Michaels, M., (2004), *The Mommy Myth*. New York: Free Press.

Faircloth, C., (2014), 'Intensive Parenting and the Expansion of Parenting', in Lee, E., Bristow J., Faircloth, C. and Macvarish, J., *Parenting Culture Studies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 25-50.

Foucault, M., (1988), 'Technologies of the Self', in Luther, M., Gutman, H. and Hutton, P. (eds), *Technologies of the Self: A seminar with Michel Foucault.* Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press: 16-49.

Foucault, M., (1991), 'Governmentality', in Burchell, G., Gordon, C. and Miller, P. (eds), *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 87-104.

Furedi, F., (2002), *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May be Best for Your Child,* London: Continuum Books.

Furedi, F., (2008), *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May be Best for Your Child,* 2nd edn, London: Continuum Books.

Gillies, V., (2005), 'Raising the 'Meritocracy': Parenting and the Individualization of Social Class', *Sociology,* 39 (5): 835-853.

Gorman, K. A. and Fritzsche, B. A., (2002), 'The Good-Mother Stereotype: Stay at Home (or Wish That you Did!)', *Journal of Applied Social Psychology,* 32 (10): 2190-2201.

Hays, S., (1996), *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

Lareau, A., (2002), 'Invisible Inequality: Social Class and Childrearing in Black Families and White Families', *American Sociological Review,* 67 (5): 747-776.

Lee, E., Macvarish, J. and Bristow, J., (2010), 'Editorial: Risk, Health, and Parenting Culture', *Health, Risk & Society,* 12 (4): 293-300.

Lewis, J., (2011), 'Parenting Programmes in England: Policy Development and Implementation Issues, 2005-2010', *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law,* 33 (2): 107-121.

Lupton, D., (2011), ''The Best Thing for the Baby': Mothers' Concepts and Experiences Related to Promoting Their Infants' Health and Development', *Health, Risk & Society,* 13 (7-8): 637-651.

Macvarish, J., (2014), 'The politics of parenting', in Lee, E., Bristow, J., Faircloth, C. and Macvarish, J., *Parenting culture studies*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 76-101.

Miller, T., (2005), *Making Sense of Motherhood: A Narrative Approach,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Nadesan, M., (2002), 'Engineering the Entrepreneurial Infant: Brain Science, Infant Development Toys, and Governmentality', *Cultural Studies,* 16 (3): 401-432.

Negra, D., (2009), *What a Girl Wants? Fantasizing the Reclamation of Self in Postfeminism,* London & New York: Routledge.

O'Connor, C. and Joffe, H., (2012), 'Media Representations of Early Human Development: Protecting, Feeding and Loving the Developing Brain', *Social Science & Medicine,* 97, 297-306.

Parton, N., (2006), *Safeguarding Childhood: Early Intervention and Surveillance in a Late Modern Society.* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Perrier, M., (2012), 'Middle Class Mothers' Moralities and 'Concerted Cultivation': Class Others, Ambivalence and Excess', *Sociology,* 47 (4): 655-670.

Romagnoli, A. and Wall, G., (2012), '"I know I'm a Good Mom": Young, Low-income Mothers' Experiences with Risk Perception, Intensive Parenting Ideology and Parenting Education Programmes', *Health, Risk & Society,* 14 (3): 273-289.

Rose, N., (1996), *Inventing Ourselves: Psychology, Power and Personhood,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rose, N., (1999), *Governing the Soul*, 2nd edn, London & New York: Free Association Books.

Shirani, F., Henwood, K. and Coltart, C., (2012), 'Meeting the Challenges of Intensive Parenting Culture: Gender, Risk Management and the Moral Parent', *Sociology,* 46 (1): 25-40.

Skeggs, B., (1997), *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable,* London: Sage.

Skeggs, B., (2011), "Imagining personhood differently; person value and autonomist working-class value practices", *The Sociological Review*, 59 (3): 496-513.

Smyth, C., (2015), 'Getting Ahead in the Preschool Years: An Analysis of a Preschool Enrichment and Entertainment Market', *Sociology,* doi: 10.1177/0038038515577916

Wall, G., (2004), 'Is Your Child's Brain Potential Maximised?: Mothering in an Age of New Brain Research', *Atlantis,* 28 (2): 41-50.

Wall, G., (2010), 'Mothers' Experiences with Intensive Parenting and Brain Development Discourse'*, Women's Studies International Forum,* 33 (3): 253-263.

Willig, C., (2013), *Introducing Qualitative Research in Psychology,* 3rd edn, Maidenhead: McGraw Hill, Open University Press.

Wolf, J., (2011), *Is Breast Best? Taking on the Breastfeeding Experts and the New High Stakes of Motherhood,* New York: New York University Press.