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Parenting and Inequality in Insecure Times. A Comment to the Symposium

Aliya Hamid Rao

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Abstract

This comment highlights how high income inequality and economic uncertainty produce new dimensions to intensive parenting amongst the middle-class. Parenting practices encourage children's development of behaviors and values which are coveted in elite professions. Amongst the advantaged, these parenting practices encourage neo-traditional family structures as a means of coping with economic uncertainty.

Keywords: Social class; gender; parenting; inequality; uncertainty.

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1 Introduction

Parenting practices are a key pathway through which intergenerational advantages or disadvantages are transmitted. In their respective articles in this symposium, Allison Pugh and Esther Dermott consider how parenting practices are evolving as institutional and economic contexts shift (Dermott, 2019; Pugh, 2019). Pugh asks: what messages do parents send to their children when uncertainty is the norm? Dermott concerns herself with the gendered demands of parenting, most commonly placed on women's shoulders across a variety of national contexts. Their answers engage with themes which are important for considering inequality in an era of uncertainty, indeed insecurity, and to formulating possible solutions to ameliorating these inequalities. In what follows, I reflect on some of the themes in their articles, and suggest ways forward for research in this area.

2 Parenting, Social Class, and Gender Inequalities

A key issue underlying both the pieces by Pugh and Dermott is the role of “intensive” parenting (Hays, 1996). Requiring extensive resources such as time, energy, and, of course, money, intensive parenting has often been conceptualized as a parenting style valued, and enacted, by the middle-class. In the United States, parenting practices that most accrue long-term advantages to children are those relying on intensive parenting. Intensive parenting in the United States has emerged in the context of high income inequality (Kornrich & Furstenberg, 2013). Middle-class parents have been at the forefront of changing the rules of the games by including additional variables into parenting as they seek to ensure that their children eventually achieve high-status occupational positions. Parenting has become individualized in the American context as the state has retreated further from providing help through social policies. For the first time in decades, young Americans can expect that they may well have a lower living standard than the prior generation. But children whose parents are able to use their resources — including time spent in parenting — to ensure the best educational and occupational trajectories, will surely start the game more advantaged than others.

In her groundbreaking *Unequal Childhoods* (2011), Annette Lareau speaks precisely to the importance of intensive parenting. Coining the term “concerted cultivation,” Lareau argues that middle-class parenting is driven by the understanding that, like a rare orchid, children need to be fastidiously cultivated. Their education, social development, and extra-curricular activities need to be meticulously strategized to accrue success in institutions such as schools. Lareau explains that working-class and poor parents' parenting styles are driven by a repertoire valuing the cultivation of “natural growth.” These parents deem it important for children to have unstructured time and to devise ways to entertain themselves independently, and without parental intervention. But these different parenting styles lead to divergent, and unequal, outcomes for children. The parenting style of middle-class parents advantages their children.

While Lareau focuses on the role of parents, Jessica Calarco, in her recent book, *Negotiating Opportunities* (2018) explains how young children too play an active role in seeking out special treatment for themselves within schools. Calarco describes this as stemming from varied “logics of action,” whereby middle-class and working-class children are taught to conceptualize authority figures, in this case teachers, in different ways. This shapes how children interact with these authority figures. Middle-class modes of interaction accrue better outcomes for children. These studies have emphasized the role of different cultural repertoires or logics of action in shaping class-behaviors. A recent vignette study, however, found that individuals across the social classes actually demonstrate very similar preferences for parenting styles — usually leaning toward an intensive parenting approach. However, those from a lower-income background also explain that their resource constraints mean that they are unable to comply with these preferences (Ishizuka, 2018).

Intensive parenting, then, has grave implications for the reproduction of class inequalities. But it also shapes gender inequalities. The common and gender-neutral use of the term intensive *parenting* belies how intensive parenting is actually profoundly gendered. This is a point of focus in Dermott's piece, where she points out how, in some contexts, fathers are embracing intensive parenting and in-

creasing their involvement with their children. Dermott highlights the role of successful social policies, in primarily democratic-socialist countries in helping increase paternal participation in childcare.

Indeed, social policies have a significant role to play in tamping down the most gender egalitarian aspects of parenting. In the United States there is evidence that younger generations have more gender egalitarian ideals for how they imagine dividing the responsibility for paid and unpaid work. In the absence of social policies to support these egalitarian ideals, higher-educated men and women, as well as lower-educated men prefer a neo-traditional arrangement as fall-back option (Pedulla & Thébaud, 2015). Neo-traditional refers to the fact that although dual-earner families are increasingly common in industrialized, Western countries, men still remain responsible for paid work and women for managing the home, even though the latter are also more likely to participate in the labor force now. The same study shows that lower-educated women, in contrast, prefer being either self-reliant or being the primary breadwinner. This is aligned with an older body of research which finds that “undoing” gender (Deutsch, 2007) may be more common amongst working-class couples, where material constraints mean a limited ability to indulge in gender egalitarian practices (Deutsch & Saxon, 1998). Taken together, the research on parenting and inequalities suggests that social policies have an important role to play in shrinking social class and gender inequalities in parenting. These have been unevenly realized across national contexts.

3 Intensive Parenting in Insecure Times

Parenting in an era of uncertainty raises its own quandaries, a point that Pugh foregrounds in her article. Pugh’s is one of the few contemporary pieces examining how the prevalence of uncertainty — a condition of our economic and social times — shapes parenting practices. Other research in this area includes Marianne Cooper (2014) who explains that affluent parents respond to uncertainty by “upscaling” their sense of security. In her study of parents in the Silicon Valley, across the social classes, Cooper finds that the most affluent parents amp up what it takes to be “secure.” One of her multi-millionaire respondents describes that he would feel secure only when he had amassed wealth amounting to \$ 50 million. These heightened conditions for security are visible in these parents’ preoccupation with ensuring that their children too maintain their privileged class positions. Affluent parents in Cooper’s study worry about competition that their children will encounter in their educational and occupational endeavors — competition which they imagine as emerging not just from other affluent American families, but affluent families across the globe, and especially from countries like China. Their intensive parenting strategy focuses on, as Cooper terms it, “perfecting” their children to thrive when faced with this inevitable worldwide competition.

Affluent parents also contend with uncertainty by striving to raise children who are “passionate” about the occupational pathways they will pursue (Nelson, 2010), and warning children about the new rules for flourishing in risky workplaces (Mendenhall, Kalil, Spindel, & Hart, 2008). The idea that children now need to be raised to be “flexible” to flourish in contemporary realities has been an underlying assumption in this research. Pugh incisively explains how the notion of flexibility is double-sided. For affluent parents, flexibility means grabbing all available opportunities to help their children develop individual selves. In contrast, flexibility has a constraining connotation for parents from lower-income backgrounds. These parents equate flexibility with insecurity. Parental messages from lower-income parents emphasize a lack of opportunity. These parents seek to protect their children from insecurity. Rather than seeing “flexibility as opportunity” as more well-off parents do, lower-income parents consider see “flexibility as armor.”

Scholarship on consumption and social class finds that middle-class children are being raised to have an “exploratory experience orientation” (Weinberger, Zavisca, & Silva, 2017). This means embracing the unfamiliar, and amassing experiences — particularly travel. In Pugh’s article, this is evident when we see how the affluent parents in her study want their children to travel and be at ease anywhere in the world. Travel and mobility are a key source of independence and development of the self. As Michelle Weinberger and co-authors (2017) point out, however, working-class children, often raised with greater financial instability, tend to favour the familiar — chain restaurants, over “exotic” foods, travel within the U.S. rather than travel the world over. How messages about flexibility are passed on to children

according to Pugh, is linked both to the “exploratory experience orientation” and to Margaret Nelson’s explanation that “passion” is cultivated in children from affluent families. As Nelson explains, under increasing uncertainty, affluent parents have added a number of variables in their parenting tool-kit. Key to this is emphasizing that children need to develop a sustained passion for activities, which will ideally lead to meaningful occupations.

The authors of these studies, including Pugh, do not directly link this focus on flexibility and passion to greater rewards in the workplace. However, recent research on hiring and promotion practices in elite organizations — such as investment banks, top law firms, and cutting-edge technology companies — shows that these wide-ranging experiences and the demonstration of passion for your work appear to be highly rewarded in professional workplaces (Reid, 2015; Rivera, 2015). In her study of hiring practices, anthropologist Ilana Gershon found that passion was prized. As she writes, one hiring manager told her the following:

I look for passion. This is what guarantees that the employee will work the long hours necessary to get the job done.

According to this manager, while skills could be taught, passion — which would encourage commitment to work — could not (Gershon, 2017). With heightened uncertainty, as full-time, stable jobs with benefits become rare, the competition gets fiercer, often turning on traits — such as passion — that are not directly related to the ability to do the job itself well. Cultivating passion, which middle-class parents strive to instill in their children, may well matter in the long-term for children in ways that parents themselves may not even realize.

4 Neo-traditional Families and Preserving Privilege

Such types of intensive parenting, where new variables enter the picture due to parental concerns about uncertainty, has gendered implications for families. In her study of motherhood in “insecure times,” Ana Villalobos explains that motherhood has transformed alongside the rise of insecurity. The mother-child relationship, according to Villalobos, becomes a “uniquely powerful relationship” wherein all expectations of security are vested: for the child *and* the mother (Villalobos, 2014). This consuming concern with the security of children is particularly evident in parenting practices of the affluent. As Cooper (2014) points out, trying to perfect their children means an intensive parental focus on children. This is achieved by having well-educated wives — who were often high-earners in their own right — stay at home and closely monitor their children’s educational development. Affluent families, Cooper explains, contend with uncertainty by deploying a gender strategy which favors a neo-traditional family form.

Relatedly, in my research on how American, professional middle-class families contend with unemployment, I find that when wives lose their jobs, families downplay the loss of her income. Instead, these families emphasize how staying at home due to unemployment enables women to practice intensive motherhood. Families explain that women had been unable to do so prior to job loss. Usually a devastating experience, women’s job loss is framed as enabling a neo-traditional family form. This also holds for unemployed women who had been the primary earners in their family. In contrast, families of unemployed men highlight the importance of men’s income to the household rather than men’s potential for engaging in intensive parenting. These families approach men’s re-employment with a deep sense of urgency (Rao, 2017). In my study, this remains the case even when unemployed men are married to wives who are the primary earners.

Increased uncertainty could mean that families can no longer practice a separation of spheres, and so they abandon gender roles which place women at the helm of unpaid work and men at paid work. Uncertainty could portend greater gender equality. But, as these studies show, when it comes to affluent families, that is not the case.

5 Ways Forward

The pieces by Pugh and Dermott raise important questions about parenting in a time of uncertainty. These are questions about how parenting is shifting; what these shifts mean for various forms of inequalities — specifically social class and gender inequalities; and the potential of social policies to curtail some of the worst aspects of these inequalities.

Another point to consider here is how race shapes parenting practices during uncertain times. Concepts such as intensive parenting and intensive motherhood have been taken as applying to all middle-class, American families. Although research on parenting has included racially diverse samples, these samples have not been sufficiently leveraged to explain how parenting strategies may be raced. Parenting practices based on social class, on the other hand, have been clearly parsed out (Calarco, 2018; Cooper, 2014; Lareau, 2011). But recent research has shown that parenting practices are actually deeply raced (Barnes, 2016; Dow, 2016). Dawn Dow's and Riché Barnes' respective research on African American middle-class mothers shows that intensive parenting does not capture the parenting ideals and practices of these mothers. Dow offers the concept of "integrated motherhood" to capture how African American mothers expect to work outside the home and also expect help from kin in child-rearing. To assume homogeneity in parenting within social classes is a limitation. Extending this research further, in terms of examining parenting during uncertainty, means carefully considering how race combines with class to shape parents' responses to uncertainty. Future research should pay attention to these important axes in seeking to further sociological research on parenting, gender, and inequality.

The role of social policy in producing specific ways of "doing gender" and "doing family" too is important. Yet, qualitative studies that can comparatively elucidate these practices and meanings remain rare. Caitlyn Collins' book *Making Motherhood Work* is a rare example of cross-national qualitative research explaining how different national-level social policies shape motherhood (Collins, 2019). But more comparative research, especially research going beyond simply the European and American contexts, is warranted in this area.

Pugh and Dermott present significant ideas which deserve engagement. We should see their pieces as invitations to expand upon research on how parenting, gender, and consequent inequalities manifest — and can be ameliorated — in our times.

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