'Good' parenting practices: how important are poverty, education and time pressure?

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Abstract

This paper examines how parenting practices popularly classed as 'good' are related to economic disadvantage, education, and time pressure. Using the 2012 UK Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) survey we argue that parenting practices such as reading, playing games and eating meals together are *not* absent among those who are less well educated, have lower incomes, or are more deprived of socially accepted necessities: therefore, political claims of widespread 'poor parenting' are misplaced. Further, we suggest that the dominant trope of poor people being poor *at* parenting may arise because the activities of the most educationally advantaged parents – who do look different to the majority – are accepted as the benchmark against whom others are assessed. This leads us to suggest that the renewed interest in sociological research on elites should be extended to family life in order that the exceptionality of the most privileged is recognised and analysed.

<u>Introduction</u>

Parenting is increasingly foregrounded in discussions of how to promote social renewal (Jensen 2010:1) in order to ensure that children become active citizens of the future. In current popular and political discourse it is parents who must take responsibility for children's social, emotional and educational success (or failure); as the Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg phrased it in 2010 "Parents hold the fortunes of the children they bring into this world in their hands" (*The Telegraph*, 18th August). The association made between the actions of parents and outcomes for children has justified the categorisation of "parenting as a public health issue" (O'Connor and Scott 2007:27) and poor parenting has therefore been identified as of acute concern (Field 2010). However critiques of poor parenting have swiftly transformed into criticism of poor parents, reproducing negative images of working class families (Gillies 2008), and harking back to the cultural deficit theory in which underachievement among the poor is deemed to be the fault of individuals, families and communities (Gordon 2011). While a substantial body of qualitative work documenting the difficulties of negotiating the demands of parenting on a limited income does now exist (see Pemberton et al. 2013 for a review) there is little quantitative work which examines whether poverty or education makes a difference to parents' level of engagement in child-related activities, and it is this question which our article addresses.

Parenting Culture

Sharon Hays' (1996) work, which introduced the adjective 'intensive' to describe expectations of mothers, has become the point of departure for discussions about the discourse and practices of contemporary parenting culture. Her description of this new era as requiring greater commitment in order to fulfil the obligations of "emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" mothering (1996:8) also find form in less academic debate. 'Tiger moms' (Chua 2011), for example, are either accused of being overly pushy in encouraging their children to take on multiple extra-curricular activities or lauded for attempting to ensure their children's future, while 'helicopter parents' are criticised for being too closely involved and protective of their children (*The Economist* 2014). Recent sociologically informed work has taken a largely critical stance against the observed intensification of parenthood. Some suggest that a constant questioning of whether parents are doing 'it' right has led to paranoia among parents (Furedi 2001). Mothers – and to a lesser degree fathers (Shirani et al. 2012) – are overly and unnecessarily worried as increasingly parenting becomes all-consuming and intensely self-conscious (Lee et al. 2014; Nelson 2010). Reece (2013) argues that the endorsement of a model of 'positive parenting' as a response to the difficult task of contemporary parenting leads to the destruction of spontaneous parent-child relationships and ultimately a coercive model of constant reflection. Similarly, Hoffman (2010) suggests that the

task of producing the 'resilient child' actually leads to greater social control and conformity. Whilst the first wave of publications documenting this parenting cultural script originated in the US, studies illustrating the psychological burden of parenting have since drawn from a wide range of countries across Europe, North America and beyond (see e.g. Faircloth et al. 2013).

Researchers have highlighted that dominant ideas of good parenthood derive largely from middle-class perspectives (Klett-Davies 2010). Lareau (2003) in the US developed the concept of 'concerted cultivation' to characterise a middle-class orientation to parenthood, in contrast to the 'natural growth' advocated by parents from working class backgrounds. Gewirtz (2001) argues that the publicly acceptable version of contemporary good parenting has its origins in the values and behaviours of a middle-class fraction, which values the instrumental and individualistic, 'active consumer' (2001:374). Irwin and Elley (2011) add an important clarification in arguing that there is significant diversity within the middle-class. Their research shows that while some middle-class parents assume their children will have educational success and are confident in their own ability to influence their children's future if necessary, others, whose circumstances mean that success is less taken for granted, demonstrate a more strategic orientation (2011:492). The range of competencies and degree of commitment associated with contemporary good parenting (Faircloth and Lee 2010; Gillies 2011) is illustrated through engagement in practices which operate as markers of appropriate parenting. Many of these activities – such as reading with children, helping with homework and visiting museums – relate particularly to education (Reay 2010; Vincent et al. 2013).

UK policy context
Interest in parenting is strongly reflected in, and reinforced by, current political debate. Concern with parenting practices was first explicitly raised in UK government policy with Keith Joseph's speech on the 'cycle of deprivation' in 1972 (Welshman 2007), although the arrival of a Labour government in 1974 led to a shift in focus with more attention on social and economic factors. The Conservative governments of the 1980s and first half of the 1990s, emphasised the importance of household form, with lone parents singled out for disapprobation. In the latter period of the 1990s under New Labour, the UK witnessed the previous focus on family *structure* replaced by greater attention on *practices,* particularly those of parents; Williams (2004) describes a policy shift away from partnering (couples) and towards parenting. Gillies sees this era as involving repositioning family as "a public rather than private concern" (2011:4.3) which provided a rationale for more direct state intervention in family lives. This ranged from advice on parenting difficulties and encouragement to engage in specific parent-child activities (such as reading with children as suggested in the Department of Health *Birth to Five* booklet 2009)

through to, as Gillies (2012) describes, more coercive and authoritarian measures which involve threats of fines and imprisonment for parents who do not comply. In particular the linking of anti-social and criminal behaviour among children to an absence of appropriate parenting was responsible for greater governmental intervention to support, guide, admonish, and, in extremis, punish parents (Edwards and Gillies 2004; Gillies 2011).

Since the new Conservative-led Coalition government took power in 2010 during a period of global economic crisis and national recession, debate over how the economy should be managed has been to the fore. As discussions about increased poverty and widening inequality have re-emerged in the UK, so too has the dominance of an individualized discourse to explain poverty. What is new is the special status attributed to parenting in overcoming material disadvantage (Author A). The Field Report (2010) which was commissioned by the government to develop a strategy to address child poverty explicitly refers to the role of 'good parenting' and notes at the outset that "We imperil the country's future if we forget that it is the aspirations and actions of parents which are critical to how well their children prosper" (Field 2010:11). Further, the role of material resources is actively downplayed at the same time as parenting is promoted as the solution to social problems; "Something more fundamental than the scarcity of money is adversely dominating the lives of these children" (Field 2010:17). And similarly, a government commissioned report on developing effective interventions with families at risk of multiple disadvantage stated that "the right kind of parenting is a bigger influence on their [children's] future than wealth, class, education or any other common social factor" (Allen 2011:xiv). There is evidence of this prioritising and individualising of parenting in other national contexts too. The widespread adoption of the 'Triple P' parenting support programme (across 25 countries) highlights that extensive reflection, and cultivation of the 'right' parenting practices, is increasingly considered a necessity (Raemakers and Vandezande 2013).

It is this approach and tone which also underpins the high profile 'Troubled Families' programme launched in the UK in 2011. This initiative targets 120,000 families in Britain who live "troubled and chaotic lives" (DWP 2012) by promoting direct interventions through a key worker. As pointed out by Levitas (2012), the initial method of classifying 'troubled families' was based on measures of severe multiple disadvantage (e.g a household with no parent in work, a parent with a long-standing disability, or a low family income), that is, families 'with troubles' who require additional support. However, the government consciously conflates families who *have* troubles with families *who cause* trouble, or to put it more colloquially 'neighbours from hell' (Levitas 2012); reflecting the current political tendency to label the most disadvantaged in society as the cause of social harm.

Thus a combination of a general concern with the interiority of family lives, alongside explicit UK policies which are placing particular attention on the parenting activities of the most disadvantaged in society, at a time when similar discourses of parenting are emerging across Europe and the Anglophone world, set the context for exploring the relationship between poverty, education and parenting.

Methods

Measures of parenting

The term 'parenting' is often used as if it refers to a single concept, when it is really a multifaceted notion comprising parenting behaviours/styles; the quality of the parent-child relationship; parenting activities; and more general caring activities (see Author A for a longer discussion). Our focus here is specifically on parenting practices, that is, direct parent-child activities. Practices are important because it is through the 'doing' of family life that expectations and daily reality are constructed (see Morgan 1996). It is also practices which have been referred to most prominently in recent governmental, think-tank and media coverage of parenting. In this paper we concentrate specifically on education related activities, joint leisure pursuits and eating together.

Within the UK there is a considerable focus on parents' role in the education of their children, based on the strong association made between parenting and outcomes for children. Frank Field MP who authored the government report *The Foundation Years* (2010) emphasises the role of the 'home learning environment' for children's future. Following this, we captured the frequency with which parents engaged with some activities that have been associated with educational success. We included information about three activities; reading with your child or talking about their reading, helping with or talking about homework, and attendance at parents' evenings. Reading with children has become especially dominant as a marker of good parenting: it is almost universally present in contemporary 'how to parent' lists (e.g. Paterson 2011) and there are numerous programmes encouraging parents to read with their children such as 'Read Across America' and 'World Book Day' (organised by UNESCO). This status is due to the particular link made between reading to children and better development of literacy and numeracy skills, most notably in the influential Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) report (Sylva et al. 2004). Involvement with homework and attendance at school parents' evenings are measures of engagement with the school curriculum and children's academic progress which are especially relevant as parents are increasingly encouraged to become more involved in classroom activities and even the running of schools (Desforges 2003).

We measured three leisure activities: playing games; sports; and watching television. Playing together is one of the measures included as a marker of a positive 'home learning environment' (Field 2010) and is also mentioned in the list of five positive parenting activities promoted by CentreForum (Paterson 2011). Playing sports on a regular basis, and more generally encouraging children to be physically active, has emerged as a consequence of concerns over child obesity (see Department of Health 2011) although discussion of the importance of this as a joint parent-child activity is less pronounced. Television viewing is rather more controversial. A dominant popular discourse suggests that television viewing as a passive (both intellectually and physically) leisure activity is damaging for children but recent research has found that children who watch more television are actually ahead of their peers in academic terms (Sullivan et al. 2013) and that the type of television watched is relevant with 'sophisticated' programmes associated with greater linguistic ability and cultural knowledge (Sullivan 2001).

We also chose to include a question on how often parents and children ate together. Family meals are viewed as a vehicle for family togetherness (Brannen et al. 2013:419) and the valorisation of family mealtimes (Gillies 2011:8.6) means that the alleged decline in families eating together is often a topic of concern, even though the extent to which there has been a genuine reduction in the family meal appears to have been exaggerated (Jackson 2008). An additional rationale for including this practice is that although it has a relatively low profile in the UK it is very prominent in other national contexts, for example in Japan the importance of co-eating has been highlighted in a series of recent government White Papers (Author A).

The focus on the impact of parenting on outcomes for children has taken for granted that 'good' parenting can be identified and measured. Our analysis cannot assess *how* parenting is enacted; it may not be reading with children but being able to do so in a way that hits the right 'educational buttons' (and so is translated into positive educational outcomes) that really matters. The analysis also leaves out other aspects of parental behaviour such as disciplinary practices, regularity of meal and bed times and nutritional value of meals. The range of the activities explored here is therefore relatively narrow[i] and focuses on those parent-child practices which have received most recent political attention.

Despite a policy focus on the early years (0-5) as being the prime point for successful intervention (e.g. Allen 2011) parents' potential negligence regarding the parenting of older children and teenagers is also evident; witness some of the comments after the English riots of August 2011 such as David Cameron's (BBC 2011) statement that the root was "a lack of proper parenting, a lack of proper upbringing" and an opinion poll finding that 85 per cent of the public cited poor parenting as the main cause of

the riots (Prasad and Bawdon 2011). Our strategy was therefore to ensure that questions were not restricted to activities that only applied to very young children and the phrasing of questions was as inclusive as possible, such as talking about homework as well as helping with it. Parents were asked how many days in the last week they had done each of the activities (Table 1).

Table 1 about here

Potential influences on parenting practices
In addition to the potential effect of poverty on our specified good parenting practices, we also posited that levels of parental education and time may have an impact. The hypothesis in relation to poverty is that we would expect those who are poor to engage in 'good' parenting practices less frequently because they lack the material resources to do so. Lacking access to taken-for-granted necessities may mean that parents are unable to fulfil the requirements of socially acceptable engaged parenting. This could take a number of forms. Poorer parents may spend less time reading with children, or playing games or sports with them because they do not have the books or equipment available at home. Initial results from the Poverty and Social Exclusion (PSE) survey found that half a million school age children (six per cent) cannot afford leisure activities (Gordon et al. 2013). Poverty may also have an impact in a less direct way through reliance on the public provision of facilities for leisure pursuits (such as parks and libraries). Davidson and Power (2007) found that in two deprived areas of East London parents had few sports or leisure facilities that were easily accessible and that cost and concerns over anti-social behaviour were additional barriers to their use. Finally, those with fewer financial resources may have a reduced ability to trade money for time.[ii] We included two measures of poverty in the analysis. Official definitions of poverty in the UK are commonly based on the proportion of the population falling below 60% of the median income after adjusting for household size and composition and we included this as our 'at-risk-of-poverty' (AROP) variable. In addition, we also used subjective assessments of poverty by asking individuals whether they consider themselves poor now and whether they consider their living standard is below average.[iii]

There is also the possibility that education may have a separate effect; those parents with higher levels of education may be better placed to engage in educational activities with their children. Those with lower educational qualifications may be less able to engage in school based activities with children because of their own lack of knowledge, for example in helping with secondary school homework. Education then may be used as a proxy for competence in the academic arena and those who have less competency may not engage in these aspects of 'good' parenting. Secondly, viewing educational attainment as bringing with it a degree of cultural capital means

that those without it may feel uncomfortable in a school environment, increasing the likelihood that they are unable to engage in dialogue with their children's teachers (Reay 1998, 2006). To measure education we used the highest qualifications of the individual who responded to the parenting questions.

The final possible influence we considered is time. There are two plausible scenarios each suggestive of a different relationship between time-pressure and engagement in our 'positive' parenting practices. Perhaps due to the combined pressures of paid work and unpaid household chores parents simply do not have enough time to engage in the full range of 'good' parenting on a frequent basis. This would result in a negative association between time pressure and our measures of good parenting. Alternatively, it is possible to hypothesise a relationship in the opposite direction. Time-use diaries suggest that one of the reasons for feelings of time scarcity is precisely because shifts in expectations around what parents do means that mothers and fathers now spend significantly more time with their children than in the past (Sullivan 2011). This would lead us to expect that parents who engage in positive parenting practices most often feel more – rather than less – time pressure. Drawing on work by Frederick (1995) and Zukewich (1998) on time scarcity we identified time pressured parents in the PSE as those who experience time scarcity according to seven or more 'time crunch' items.[iv] In addition we included two measures of household employment – whether anyone in the household is unemployed and whether all adults are in work – to gain a sense of parents' time commitments to paid work.

Our data is drawn from the Poverty and Social Exclusion in the UK (PSE) survey which was carried out between March and December 2012 and covered 5,193 households in which 12,097 people were living. The multistage survey was primarily concerned with measuring poverty through identifying how many people fall below what the public agree is a minimum standard of living. The smaller sample analysed for this paper was made up of all households which included a parent and at least one dependent child aged 16 or under which resulted in a sample of 1,665 cases. Overall, 30 per cent of the weighted sample had a degree or higher qualification, 20 per cent were solo parents[v], 31 per cent lived in a household at risk of poverty, 44 per cent felt poor sometimes or all the time, and 14 per cent rated their living standards below average. A small minority of 5 per cent experienced extreme time pressure (see Gordon et al. 2013 for statistics on the survey as whole).

<u>Parenting Activities</u>
Our descriptive analysis of each parenting activity (Figure 1) shows that over 50 per cent of parents say they eat a meal, watch TV, read and play games with their children, as well as helping with homework every day or most days; these are all

frequently undertaken activities. Only doing sports with children registers a lower level of regular engagement, although there are still 28 per cent of parents who say that they do this at least four days a week. Whether parents attended school parents' evenings was asked as a separate question and responses to this were also examined. There were 1405 responses[vi] with an overwhelming 90 per cent of parents saying that they had attended at least one meeting in the last year.

Figure 1 about here

Notwithstanding the general impression of significant parental engagement, and aside from the parents' evening question, there is a substantial degree of variation in parenting practices. For example while 43 per cent of parents read with their children every day, there are 20 per cent who say that they never do so and a further 21 per cent who do so a maximum of three days a week. This level of variation across our parenting activities allows for the opportunity of exploring which, if any, of our suggested influencing factors are related to the frequency of parenting activities.

Before looking at the influence of poverty, education and time we examined the extent to which these parental activities varied by the age of children. Unlike cohort studies, which take as their sampling strategy a group of participants who are all the same age, our household study includes parents with dependent children from 0 to 16. As noted above we did not restrict our analysis to the youngest age group and therefore designed questions that would apply across a relatively wide age spectrum e.g. the question on reading was phrased as 'How often do you read with your children or talk with them about what they are reading' so as to avoid restricting this question to parents whose children cannot read independently. It is to be expected that the type of activities and their frequency varies as children grow older: doing sporting activities or playing games together might be expected to peak in the primary school years; reading might be associated most strongly with early years; and television viewing could be anticipated as less age specific. While not central to our research question, analysis confirmed the importance of taking children's age into account; the frequency of television viewing, playing games, reading and sporting activities are highly child-age dependent. Around 80 per cent of parents with a child aged under five play games four or more days a week but this fell to only ten per cent amongst those whose youngest child was 12 or over. Assistance with homework had a different distribution with a more consistent 55 to 65 per cent of parents doing schoolwork with children most or every day; the highest percentage was among parents whose youngest child was of primary school age. Similarly, eating together showed relatively little variation by age of child.

Time pressure, Poverty and Education

Turning to our substantive concerns, we present the analysis in terms of relative risk ratios in Figure 2. The relative risk is the ratio of two group percentages so that a relative risk (RR) significantly higher or lower than 1 indicates a difference between the two groups. The chart shows the relative risk of parents with the characteristics on the horizontal axis (e.g. being at risk of poverty) of having low (3 or fewer days) engagement in parental activities, compared to other parents. Relative Risks above the line set at 1 indicate parents with those characteristics are more likely to have low engagement; those below the line show parents with those characteristics are less likely to have low engagement i.e. are more likely to engage in these activities most or every day. Where error bars do not cross the line set at 1 there is a statistically significant difference between parents with and without the listed characteristics and these significant relationships are also indicated by a full black dot.

First to the independent variables which offered no, or very little, explanatory power. The degree to which parents expressed a feeling of time pressure was not associated with any of our named parenting activities. It is worth noting that in relation to all the dependent parenting practice variables the confidence intervals for our measure of 'time crunch' were very large. This is partly because this measure of extreme time pressure includes only a small minority of parents. However more generous (lower threshold) time-crunch measures also showed no significant relationship.[vii] Our proxy measure of hours available for parent-child interaction (employment) also produced no significant relationships. So, neither the time pressure of juggling paid work nor the subjective experience of feeling 'rushed' is related to the frequency of our parenting activities.

Importantly, whether a household can be categorised as poor – measured either by income or subjectively – made no significant difference to the frequency with which parents engaged in most of our 'good' parenting activities. This finding is worth re-emphasising; those with lower incomes or who felt poor were as likely to engage in all of the 'good' parent-child activities as everyone else. The two exceptions to this are TV viewing and having an evening meal with children; parents whose household income was below 60% of the median were *more* likely to watch television and have evening meals with their children frequently. These two activities also stood out in relation to educational qualifications and are discussed further below. Therefore, despite the frequently made association between poverty and a lack of appropriate parenting, there is no clear evidence for this relationship in our findings.

Our third independent variable – education – also produced some non-significant results. The level of educational qualification held was irrelevant in relation to sports activities and playing games. However, those holding a degree level qualification or

higher were more likely to read or do homework with children frequently. Television viewing and having an evening meal together had a rather different relationship; those with degree or higher educational qualifications were less likely to watch television and have a meal with their children frequently. Specifically they were 1.8 (television) and 2.2 (meal) times more likely to carry out these activities three or fewer days a week than those who with lower qualifications. Hence, 37 per cent of parents with a degree watch television with their children 3 or fewer days a week, compared to 28 per cent of those who have lower qualifications (a relative risk of 1.7).[viii]

Figure 2 about here

In relation to the relationships with television viewing and family mealtimes, we suggest that both material and cultural factors may play a role. The children of those with greater financial resources may be less likely to rely on television viewing as a leisure pursuit as they have the ability to access a wide range of paid activities. These may be activities such as going to the cinema or theatre that are done as a family; Gilby et al. (2008) found that higher income families have more days out and less time at home. Alternatively they may be extra-curricular activities for children such as sports clubs or music lessons. Engaging in a combination of these activities may reduce the frequency of television watching.

The findings regarding television viewing may also be evidence of a cultural gap between middle-class and working-class views that reflects a growing aversion to television viewing as a passive leisure activity among some highly educated and better off families. Given that the responses are those offered by parents, there may be the possibility of a social desirability bias whereby some parents wish to 'display' (cf Finch 2007) a version of good parenthood/family that does not include television viewing. Vincent and Ball (2007) suggest that enrolling children on enrichment activities was a way their middle-class interviewees managed risks and anxieties about parenting in an uncertain social context. Similarly Wheeler (2014) suggests that middles-class families are becoming increasingly child-centred and structured in order to fulfil dominant ideas of good parenting. Minimising television viewing and emphasising other activities would be in line with this argument. This may also mean that television is used differently by families depending on their educational background and occupational situation. For middle-class families who are time poor due to long working weeks[ix] (Warren 2003) television may be used as a 'babysitting' service allowing parents to get on with household tasks and paid work at home as opposed to a joint leisure activity for the family to do together; note that the questions refer to the extent to which television is a joint parent-child activity not the total time that children spend watching television.

Highly educated parents were also less likely to have a family meal together frequently. Figure 2 shows that parents who are more highly educated are 50 per cent more likely to have a meal with their children 3 or fewer days a week than those with lower educational qualification. The issue of coordinating synchronous family time has been highlighted as particularly difficult for dual earning households (Brannen et al. 2013) who make up an increasing proportion of couple households with children (Connolly et al. 2013). Brannen et al.'s (2013) qualitative work on family meal times found that although all their families prioritised eating together as a principle of family life, it was difficult to adhere to this in practice. Time pressures on dual working families meant it was not always possible to coordinate eating together given the organisation of working hours and children's activities. They also note that mothers' accounts "suggest little regret but rather an accommodation to reality" (p428). It is of note that family mealtimes are viewed as valuable but seem to hold a less central position in the 'doing' of family life in the UK than in some other countries, such as Japan (Author A). In the UK it seems possible for family meals to be downplayed relative to other practices; perhaps in favour of 'dyadic' parent-child activities such as reading or supporting homework that are more flexible in terms of when they happen.

Given existing evidence about middle-class concerted cultivation, in combination with a dominant discourse that educational achievement is a necessary requirement for future employability, and a political mantra that parental engagement in children's schooling is essential, the finding that those with higher educational qualifications are more likely to engage in homework and reading with children is perhaps unsurprising. Hartas (2011) used the Millennium Cohort Study to examine the impact of parental socio-economic characteristics and home learning activities on outcomes for young children (a different research question to the one we address here). However, her analysis also found that families with both higher incomes and higher levels of education were more involved in homework and 'enrichment activities', such as reading and storytelling. Similarly, Borra and Sevilla (2014), drawing on time-use diaries, found that more educated parents in the UK were likely to spend time helping their children with homework rather than other forms of engagement.

'Good' and 'Bad' Parents
We examined whether there were strong binary correlations (known formally as tetrachoric correlations) between each of the parenting activities, that is, whether if a parent does one of the activities frequently it is likely that they also do others frequently (and, conversely, both activities infrequently). Our findings show, for the most part, low correlations (less than 0.5) between the various parenting practices

with the strongest correlation between sports activities and playing games at 0.7 and playing games and reading at 0.8. This suggests that there is no overarching 'good parenting package' which some parents observe and others avoid.

We further explored this issue by using latent class analysis, a statistical method which allows researchers to find groups with distinct underlying patterns on a set of variables[x]. As shown in figure 3, we again found no evidence of a distinct group of parents who consistently do not engage in these high-profile parent-child activities. This is potentially important since recent political discourse has not only promoted the idea that 'poor parenting' exists but also emphasised the existence of a *group* of parents who persistently fail to engage in parenting activities that are beneficial for their children. Instead, by looking at the statistical association between latent class membership, age of youngest child, and the independent variables considered above, this analysis offers support for our earlier findings that children's age is the most significant indicator of whether parents engage in key parenting activities. Two of the classes strongly reflected the age of children; parents who were least likely to have their youngest child under five had the lowest activity levels across the board, and those most likely to have their youngest child under five had notably high frequencies for reading and playing. A third class tracked the average frequency of engagement in child based activities for parents as a whole. Finally, a fourth class was present. This group is of interest because, although a clear minority at 24 per cent, they were noticeably more engaged in reading and significantly more likely to have degree or higher levels of educational qualifications themselves.[xi] The existence of this group of parents explains the relationship between reading and educational qualifications referred to earlier.

Figure 3 about here

Conclusion

Our analysis explores the relationship between poverty, education, time and high profile 'good' parenting practices across a sample of UK parents. While the results are especially pertinent to the UK given current government discourse and policy, they also are relevant to broader debates on the nature of contemporary parenting, state intervention in family life, and the impact of economic and educational resources on what parents do.

Our results can be read as confirmation of the dominance of a culture of intensive parenting in which parents are expected to engage in a range of child-centred activities on a regular basis. Contemporary good parenting has been characterised as an "affiliation to a certain way of raising a child" (Faircloth and Lee 2010) which in practice involves an overly narrow formulation of good parenting that dominates in

popular discourse and policy (Gillies 2010). The research presented here suggests that, whether for good or ill, the mantra of what involved parenting *should* do appears to correspond with parents' everyday practices. As is the case with any survey asking about activities there may be a disjuncture between what people say they do and what they really do. However, the high level of agreement in the responses could also be interpreted as additional evidence of coherence across the social spectrum around the 'displays' (cf Finch 2007) which count as good parenting. This finding might suggest that a focus for family sociologists should continue to be explicating the relationship between the theoretical concepts of 'doing' and 'displaying' parenting.

The findings support the view that associations made between low levels of education, poverty and poor parenting are ideologically driven rather than based on empirical evidence. Claims that families who are poor or are less well educated do not engage in high profile 'good' parenting practices are misplaced. And we found no evidence for the existence of a group of 'delinquent' parents who fail to participate in parent-child activities; in fact very few respondents were 'opting out' of age appropriate parenting practices. These results are then at odds with commonplace popular, media and political discourses which refer, often uncontroversially, to 'problem parents' in 'troubled families' who need to be 'fixed'. These findings are valuable because they can help to refute this dominant discourse with quantitative evidence.

Gewirtz's (2001) argument was that good parenting originates in the values and behaviours of a fraction of middle-class parents while Irwin and Elley (2011) also drew attention to differences within the middle-class. We also found evidence of the existence of a group of parents at the top end of the social spectrum who are doing more – or at least saying they are doing more – than the rest. It should be emphasised that this finding is less robust than our main finding. However, it does indicate that a reorientation in thinking about who really is 'different' is in order. Our suggestion is that the most educationally advantaged fraction of the middle-class are setting the tone and standard in terms of key markers of educationally 'appropriate' and 'supportive' parenting. Instead of maintaining a focus on the parenting behaviours of those who are most disadvantaged in the mistaken belief that they 'do' parenting differently, it may be time for greater attention on the most advantaged. This is line with the recent call for those measuring living standards to improve indices in relation to middle and high living standards (Perry 2011) and with Mike Savage's (2013) view that sociologists should bring back the study of elites and "focus class analysis right at the top of the class structure". Our findings also have implications for thinking about the relationship between values and behaviours in relation to class and inequality. The analysis indicates that the most educated

parents have the ability to operationalise widely held views about the value of educational achievement above and beyond the practices of the average parent. Engaging in these activities are likely, indeed have been shown, to provide an instrumental advantage for their children's future (Henderson 2013). Our empirical findings are therefore pertinent in contributing to theoretical debates which attempt to explain how social inequalities are maintained, and, in particular, support the view that educational elitism is a key domain (Dorling 2011).

Finally, the idea of high profile as valid proxies for 'good' parenting (beyond ensuring that children gain a social advantage) should be called into question. The task for parenting research should not only be to examine relationships between resources and practices but also to question what is being measured and how this impacts on how we think about personal relationships. A richer way to speak of parenting would move away from a goal-oriented, individualised framework which limits articulations and understanding of what it means to be a parent (Raemaekers and Suissa 2011) and instead acknowledge the significance of intimacy, (Author A), emotionality and reciprocity; elements that are present- rather than future-oriented.

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[i] Limitations of time in a survey also necessarily restricted the number of activities that could be included.

[ii] Outsourcing household tasks is an increasingly popular option to address increased time pressure among those with high enough disposable income (Jones 2003).

[iii] Further details of the PSE 2012 survey including full questionnaires are available at http://www.poverty.ac.uk.pse-research/about

[iv] The time crunch module is made of ten statements with which respondents are asked to agree or disagree. The complete statements are available in the questionnaire.

[v] Lone parents living with their children and no other adult in the household.

[vi] Only parents with a school aged child were asked this question.

[vii] One time crunch item that led to lower reliability (Cronbach's alpha) when included in the time crunch score was also removed but the results remained similar.

[viii] As a caveat, these relationships could be partly due to compositional effects and the degree to which this is the case could be explored further by looking across a range of datasets.

[ix] As opposed to time poverty caused by partners working different work schedules.

[x] The number of latent classes was decided by looking at average changes in Adjusted Likelihood, BIC and Entropy values across 100 bootstrap samples (see Hagenaars and McCutcheon 2002 for examples).

[xi] 40 per cent have degree or higher educational qualifications, compared to 26 per cent or below for parents in other classes (χ^2 with Rao & Scott adjustment for complex samples, F=3.4, adjusted ddf=3217, p=0.016).

Table 1
Questions on Parenting Practices

| |
|---|
| Education
    • In the last 12 months, have you (or your partner) attended a school parents' evening? (Yes/No)
    • How many days in the past 7 days have you, or your partner read stories with your child/children or talked with them about what they are reading?
    • How many days in the past 7 days have you, or your partner helped with or discussed homework with your child/children?
Leisure
    • How many days in the past 7 days have you, or your partner played games with your child/children e.g. computer games, toys, puzzles etc.?
    • How many days in the past 7 days have you, or your partner done sporting or physical activities with your child/children?
    • How many days in the past 7 days have you, or your partner watched TV with your child/children?
Family mealtimes
    • How many days in the past 7 days have you, or your partner eaten an evening meal with your child/children? |

Figure 1
Prevalence of Parenting Practices (n=1665)
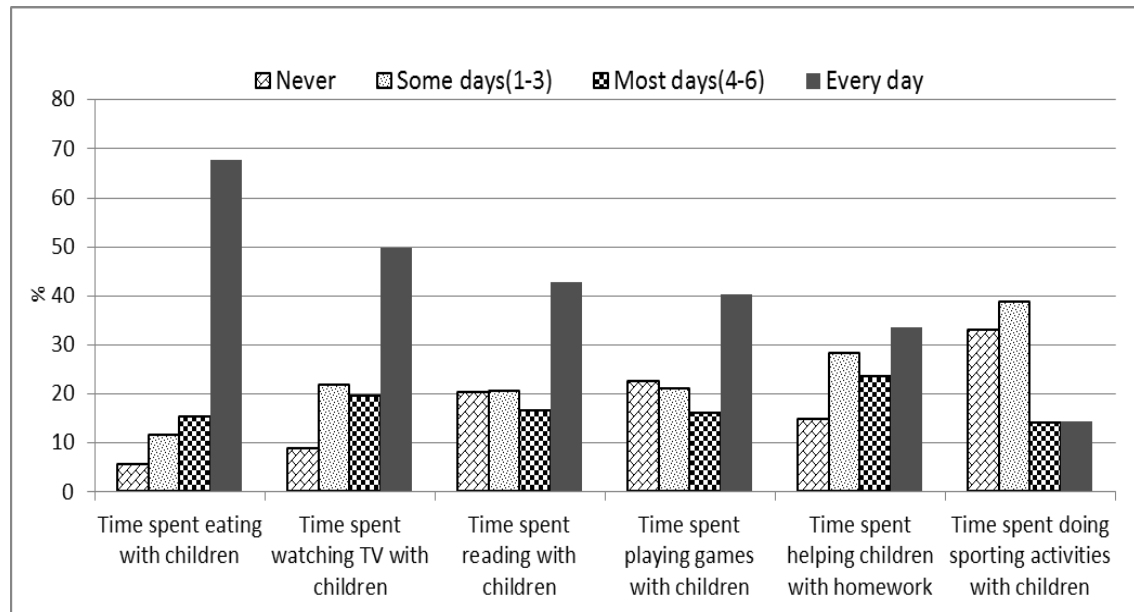
Figure 2

Relative risk of taking part in parenting activities 3 or fewer days a week

Significant differences indicated by black dot, not significant differences by white dot.
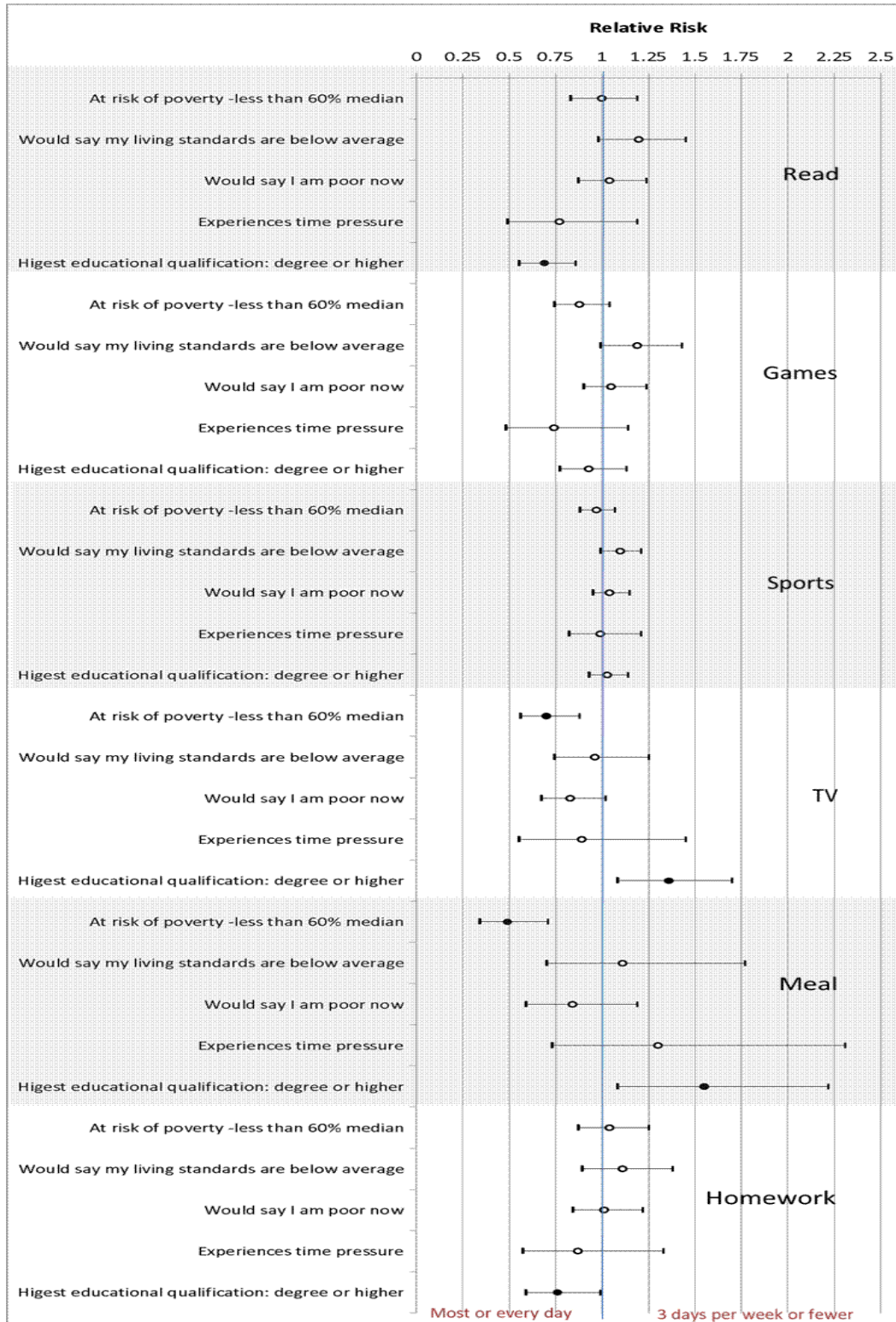
Figure 3
Engaging in Parenting Activities 3 or Fewer Days Per Week: Latent Class Profiles