

LEARNING TO BE AN INTENSIVE PARENT: UNCOVERING  
THE PROCESS OF ADULT SOCIALIZATION

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
Department of Sociology

MAY 2022

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To the Faculty of Washington State University:

The members of the Committee appointed to examine the dissertation of AMANDA  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to acknowledge first, my chair, Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson, for her continual support, encouragement, and patience throughout my time as a Ph.D. student. She has sacrificed considerable time to meet with me regularly, and I know she has advocated on many occasions for opportunities to remain available to me. I also acknowledge my committee members, Jennifer Sherman and Don Dillman. Jenn trained me in the methodology I used to complete this my dissertation research and her insights and feedback on how to do qualitative research underpin the whole project. Don helped me clarify and improve my writing and he offered feedback in less than 24 hours when I faced critical deadlines. For all of these things, along with the critical feedback necessary for completing a dissertation, I thank my committee members.

Aside from my academic supporters, I wish to acknowledge my family for their support. My experience as a graduate student has been long and complicated. My husband, Andrew Anaya, has never had the opportunity to know me outside of my life as a graduate student. I thank him for standing by my side through the many years. I also acknowledge my parents, Dirk and Loretta Clayson. They have given me a different kind of support by regularly verbalizing that their love and pride in me are not grounded in my success or failure, or my ability to perform well. I wish everyone had that kind of unconditional love. Finally, I thank my “kids,” L, T, and N. They believed in me when I found it hard to believe in myself.

# LEARNING TO BE AN INTENSIVE PARENT: UNCOVERING THE PROCESS OF ADULT SOCIALIZATION

## Abstract

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May 2022

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A paradox exists among today's middle-class parents. Parents today face increased strain on their personal resources, yet middle-class parents continue to make significant investments of time, money, and emotional energy into their children – a practice known as intensive parenting (Hays 1996). The current study seeks to understand why this paradox exists by looking at how parents come to hold intensive parenting standards for themselves. It was speculated that others' negative judgements during social interactions played a part in why parents held themselves to intensive parenting standards. Data was collected through 55 in-depth interviews with mothers and fathers. Findings reveal that intensive parenting standards are adopted by many from their own parents, but standards are renegotiated by couples once they become parents themselves. Fathers often defer to mothers to guide and direct the resource investments they make in their children. Some evidence is given for why those with reason to resist intensive parenting ideals do not. Adults that struggle to meet identity standards may not speak out to change those standards because they want to avoid scrutinization of their performance. Surprisingly, parents do not hold to intensive parenting standards because of the pressure they feel from others' judgements. Instead, they hold to them as a strategy to create security for their children's future, which is seen

as a positive and meaningful endeavor. These findings give explanation for why intensive parenting remains prevalent in a resource-strained society.

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## **Dedication**

To L, T, and N

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Intensive parenting is a prevalent parenting ideology within the United States (Ishizuka 2019; Mintz 2014; Bianchi 2011). Within this ideology exists the expectation that parents continually invest large amounts of emotion, time, and money into their children (Hays 1996). A good parent draws out from themselves as much as they possibly can and gives it all to their child. This transfer includes making great personal sacrifices and doing everything possible to ensure the child's well-being and success. While many parents idealize these goals, there may be good reason for parents to make these kinds of investments; research shows that parental financial and time investments do make some difference in achieving positive child outcomes (Hsin and Felfe 2014). However, the causality between specific kinds of investments and longer-term outcomes is not well proven and needs greater research (Mayer 2010).

Although investing in children may initially sound like something without a downside, economic pressures have shifted and continue to do so, leaving many individuals today feeling short on time, money, and emotional energy (Chetty et al. 2016). With America often being depicted as one of the most overworked nations, the average number of hours Americans work in a paid job has gradually risen the last two decades (Pew Research Center 2016b). Along with increased work hours, the productivity that employers get out of their employees per each hour worked has also gone up significantly. Americans are not only working more hours, but they are also working harder (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016; Pew Research Center 2016b). Yet aside from top 10th percentile earners, employees' real wages in the last forty years have only slightly increased for women and have gone down for men (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2016; Congressional Research Service Report 2019).

Changes in women's roles over the last few decades also contribute to mothers in particular feeling "always rushed" as they juggle work and family life demands (Bianchi 2011). The majority of mothers with small children now work outside the home to help provide for their families (Bianchi 2011), yet mothers' earnings remain lower on average than those of both men and childless women (Corell et al 2007). Women also tend to do the majority of the unpaid housework within their homes, even when their paid work hours are equal to those of their husbands (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019; Bianchi et al. 2012; Krant-Kentz 2009). Women do more hours of childcare work than men as well, so that when paid and unpaid work hours are combined, mothers are often working more overall hours per week than fathers (Yavorsky et al. 2015).

Fathers are not without strain though. Compared to other men, fathers work more hours per week in their jobs (Weinshenker 2015), and higher hours of work are associated with higher levels of work-life conflict (Auman et al. 2011). Surprisingly, the percentage of men reporting that they feel significant work-life conflict has surpassed the percentage of women, with 60% of dual-earner fathers reporting significant conflict compared to 47% of dual-earner mothers (Auman et al. 2011). Interestingly, changing the situation at home does not seem to mitigate these numbers. Instead the only effective way to reduce work-life conflict was to decrease the numbers of hours worked (Auman et al 2011). Yet most fathers feel that maintaining their employment and providing for their children financially is a necessary part of being a good father (Townsend 2002).

When considering single parents, the situation seems even bleaker. Without another parenting partner to provide additional resources, the single parent must constantly find a way to make it all work, with little or no breathing room for mistakes. The motherhood wage penalty is

especially problematic given that the majority of single parents in the United States are women (U.S. Census Bureau 2016). Women with lower incomes prior to birth experience the motherhood wage penalty to a greater degree than do women of higher socioeconomic status (Budig 2010). This means mothers with the least resources are punished the most for having children (Budig 2010). Single mothers are therefore left in a more precarious situation, straining to take care of their families with fewer financial resources than childless women of similar socioeconomic status and other two parent families. Furthermore, the United States is one of the few developed countries with no centralized childcare programming or paid parental leave (Pew Research Center 2016). Ignoring the economic shifts, governmental agencies instead leave parents to navigate these issues on their own. Creating family security has now become a private affair for individuals to work out themselves (Cooper 2014).

With these mounting pressures, one might expect that parents would scale back their resource investments in children in order to preserve themselves, but the opposite is true: parental resource investment has only grown compared to previous generations (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2019; Bianchi 2011). Despite the current social context, intensive parenting remains durable and pervasive. New parents continue to embrace intensive parenting even as it becomes harder to enact. The socialization process of parents that I examine in this dissertation may help explain this paradox.

Although many studies have been done on parents, an in-depth examination of how parents are socialized within our current culture of intensive parenting has not been done. Yet, the continuance of this intensive parenting culture and its pervasiveness say something about the effectiveness of the socialization happening. Furthermore, adult socialization in general has not been well understood, and sociologists lack a unifying theory on how adult socialization happens

(Lutfey and Mortimer 2003). When it comes to understanding the mechanisms and processes of adult socialization, identity theory may help explain these shortcomings.

Identity theory helps explain how individuals take in and process information regarding themselves and their roles (Burke and Stets 2009). When individuals are exposed to ideas about parenting through their social interactions with others, they pick up on the viewpoints, ideas, or meanings that others attach to specific roles. As individuals then accept or reject these shared ideas or meanings, identities begin to form. Individuals then use these identity meanings as guides for their own actions (Burke and Stets 2009). For example, the identity of “parent” might include meanings about how much parents should invest in their children, and what limits are put in place concerning expenditure of their own resources. These accepted meanings may motivate parents to align their behavior to be in accordance with their identity. Parents may also promote their own internalized ideals as the correct or best way to parent.

The aim of this study is therefore twofold. First, I seek to understand how parents are effectively socialized into a parenting culture where we might expect more resistance due increasing strain on resources. Second, I seek to help build theory on how adult socialization works by drawing on identity theory to explain the processes parents go through during their socialization.

### **Intensive Parenting**

Part of the reason for greater investment in children is the shifting value of children themselves overtime (Coltrane 2004; Hays 1996). In the later 1800s and early 1900s more and more people moved from agricultural pursuits into factory work and they no longer needed several children to help manage farmland, animals, and crops. Prior to industrialization, it was common and viewed favorably to have six or more children (Hacker 2003), but as our society

moved away from an economy based on agriculture, children lost their economic value. This was further solidified as child labor laws were passed and childhood came to be seen as a time of innocence that needed protection (Hays 1996).

Furthermore, birth control developments in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century led to greater control in family planning and overall number of births (Hays 1996). Medical advances and public safety improvements increased the likelihood that parents would see each of their children survive to adulthood. Thus, as children no longer were necessary for maintaining a livelihood and because the timing of births could be manipulated, the arrival of children became a parental choice more than an inevitable and necessary fact of life (Hays 1996). Children became more valued for the emotional function they could serve in their parent's lives than for the economic utility they might bring.

More modern attempts have evolved to make economic valuations of children take into account the emotional pricelessness of children to their parents, as reflected in hefty life insurance payouts for deceased children or the costly adoption fees for obtaining a child (Zelizer 1985). As parents started having fewer children, each individual child became imbued with greater intrinsic emotional value and resources no longer had to be spread thin to accommodate many offspring. Instead resources could be funneled into trying to guarantee the success of only a few children (Hays 1996).

With these changes, carefulness in parenting decisions became expected and considered possible, and such thinking was widely emphasized in parenting magazines and books during the late 70s and 80s (Cohen 2015). Failure of parents to consider the impact of their own decisions was considered reckless parenting, and it was assumed that such recklessness would result in negative outcomes for children. Conversely, the success of children was thought to be primarily

due to parents' careful planning and consideration. From this perspective, if children failed, parents were and should be the first to be held responsible. Parents could supposedly avoid these pitfalls for themselves and their children by taking an intensive approach to their parenting (Cohen 2015).

While intensive parenting ideologies have arisen and become the norm over the last four decades, income and wealth inequality has also been steadily increasing, making parents' resources more limited in general (Mintz 2014). Inflation rates have increased, but average pay has not kept pace, and most families today find they need both parents to work to provide a reasonable standard of living (Mintz 2014). The costs of raising a child have also increased, with the average projected cost currently at \$233,610 to raise a middle-class child from birth until age 17 (Lino et al. 2017). This figure does not include saved money for college or job-training programs that might help the child secure a better position in the labor market when they make their own transition into adulthood (Lino et al. 2017). These changes have made many parents aware that raising a child and helping them become successful in the new economic landscape often requires some kind of deliberate effort. Investing resources into their children is a strategy that many hopeful parents use to give their kids better opportunities in life, and hefty investments can start even before the child is ever born. Even middle-class parents are stressed about their future security (Cooper 2014), and they often use their negotiating skills to secure advantages for their children in educational settings (Calarco 2018).

Although alternative parenting ideologies do exist, many of them do not resist the underlying aims of intensive parenting. Alternative ideologies still support extensive investments in the child but may promote different kinds of investments (Elkind 2006). For example, intensive parenting often extols large investments of emotional energy, time, and



money into extracurricular activities –the idea being that these will help the child develop and give them better future opportunities (Hsin and Felfe 2014; Hays 1996). An alternative ideology criticizes the overbooking of children’s schedules and calls for more free play, yet at the same time requires parents to invest significant time, money, and emotion into making sure the free play accomplishes the correct outcomes for the child – a happy, relaxed child that is unaware of the strains of the adult world (Elkind 2006).

These middle-class parenting approaches with less structure may at first glance seem to contradict the values of intensive parenting, but upon closer examination these strategies do not necessarily undermine intensive parenting. Two examples of this include “hurrying children” (Elkind 2006) and the let-them-be-little approach popularized on social media in the 2010s. “Hurried children” are children that are rushed to grow up and be capable of interacting at an adult level and in adult environments at a young age, with the idea that the earlier they can do this the better they will be prepared to succeed in life (Elkind 2006). However, given the developmental needs of children this approach can actually cause problems when the children define their success according to adult standards that are impossible for them to meet in the present moment (Elkind 2006). Alternatively the #letthembelittle hashtag may have become popular in social media around the 2010s as a reaction to the problems resulting for “hurried children”. This movement promoted parenting strategies that focused on unstructured play and flowing schedules that did not revolve around adult timetables. Although these parenting strategies are very different both emphasize the value of investing significant time, money, and energy into children. Parents that saw hurrying their children as the best strategy invested little time in just being with their children, but significant time in getting them from place to place and activity to activity. Money and emotion were both expended, but in different ways.

One less prevalent and less intensive culture of parenting that has been studied is “good enough parenting” (Bettelheim 1988). Instead of focusing on making the kind of investments that child experts suggest, which should have payoffs in the long run, good enough parenting focuses on listening to what each unique child communicates about their current needs and responding to that communication. Some children might not need or want significant investments, in which case parents are freed up to feel more confident that their child is doing ok with whatever level of resources the child currently has (Bettelheim 1988). Even though good enough parenting questions some of the values of intensive parenting, it is not the dominant parenting ideology represented in the U.S. (Tichenor et al. 2017; Mintz 2014). Parents that subscribe to good enough parenting may even move toward this ideal *after* being exposed to and rejecting the values of the dominant culture of intensive parenting, possibly due to some kind of limitation on their resources, or feeling that their resources could be used elsewhere without harmful effects on their children. Yet even in these instances parents must still make great efforts to work out what is “enough” for their own child. It may be that this kind of investment early on can help reduce parents’ strain over time, but it still requires much from parents in the beginning. In this way, the direction of the investments may be different, but the imperative that extensive investments are made is still widely accepted. Thus we find that intensive parenting is ubiquitous and remains durable amidst the various types of parenting today.

Both low-income and middle-class parents believe that investing in children gives children better opportunities for success, but parents of different classes use different parenting techniques to accomplish their investing (Lareau 2005). These differing types of investments lead to greater and lesser results for children depending on what class they belong to. Middle-class families give lots of time, money, and emotional energy to the management of structured

activities. In contrast, low-income families hold the idea that children do not need a highly structured development program to succeed. Instead they are thought to primarily need love and safety, which if provided will be enough for the child to blossom on their own into whatever they are meant to be (Lareau 2005).

Unfortunately, low-income children show a disadvantage when compared to same age middle-class children who have been pushed to achieve more and expected from a young age to socialize as semi-peers with adults. For example, middle-class children are often taught to advocate for themselves and negotiate for their own best interests, which gives them an advantage. As much as low-income parents try to invest the resources they have into their children, they ultimately cannot teach their children social skills they do not have themselves. They also cannot invest financial resources when there are no financial resources to invest. Overall, middle-class parents tend to be more successful with investment returns (i.e. better child outcomes) because, similar to financial investing, they can make various types of investments and in greater quantities. These differing results for children confirm that not all investments are equal (Lareau 2005). Thus, extensive investing alone does not always lead to the desired outcome. As mentioned earlier, more research is needed to understand the complex relationship between investment type, quantity, and timing, and the length and strength of any resulting positive child outcomes (Mayer 2010). Understanding of the role of any mediating factors, such as the child's personality, gender, or cultural context, is also needed (Mayer 2010).

When considering the context of class, middle-class Americans may more easily buy into intensive parenting culture due to having more overall resources available for child investment; however, strain on these resources is becoming increasingly common even among the middle-class (Chetty et al. 2016). Alternatively, there are times when low-income or poor individuals

adopt middle-class values in an effort to elevate themselves in class status (Horton 1982).

Furthermore, media outlets, advertisement campaigns, public service programs, and educational forums, in which the cultural ideals of the middle-class are strongly represented, continually help perpetuate middle-class values even among low-income families.

### **Adult Socialization**

Although the current culture of parenting is an intensive parenting culture, it is not clear how parents learn and internalize these values. At times children do pick up and repeat parenting behaviors that were modeled by their own parents, and it is not uncommon for patterns of parenting – both positive and negative – to be repeated across generations. Research confirms intergenerational transfer in such things as responses to stress, communication patterns, partner relationship management, time management, and moral frameworks (Karen et al. 2016). But focusing on and internalizing a specific set of values that orients parenting behavior does not seem to come until later in life (Streib 2015). Thus, what it means to parent, or what the role of parent implies, may not be consciously thought about until becoming a parent is even a possibility – sometime between puberty at the earliest, and when the individual actually becomes a parent at the latest. While some socialization likely takes place during childhood and youth, it would also seem likely that socialization does not fully take hold or increase until adulthood. The current study finds evidence to support this idea, with most parents reporting that they always assumed they would eventually be a parent, but they did not think much about it until they started trying to have their own child or found out they were pregnant. Thus, when parents take on their new role they must go through a learning process to become competent in the tasks required of the role.

Like other forms of adult socialization, training for parenthood may have unique aspects to it. Compared to children, adults have greater ability to seek out their own learning opportunities. Adults also have more personal power to resist unwanted, unsolicited socialization attempts by others. Yet when looking to the current theory on adult socialization for insight into how parents are being socialized we find that theory here is underdeveloped. The theory on adult socialization lacks general cohesiveness, and previous research that might have developed overarching theory focused primarily on the outcomes of the unique substantive topics, such as adopting employer values (Scott and Marshall 2009), demonstrating professionalism in a profession (Lutfey and Mortimer 2003), excelling as a student (Lutfey and Mortimer 2003), overcoming addiction (Stevens and Jason 2015) or implementing new health behaviors as an adult (Peterson et al. 2014).

Empirical studies focused on these substantive topics and the specific changes in values, attitudes, and behaviors that occur within adults, leave a lot to be said on how those changes take place. Spouses from different family backgrounds often influence and socialize their partners into new ways of thinking and acting (Lutfey and Mortimer 2003). Colleges and universities socialize students for new kinds of learning and for future professional activity (Lutfey and Mortimer 2003). Workplaces socialize workers into “adopting behaviors preferred by employers” (Scott and Marshall 2009). Workers also learn new ideologies from employers as employers attempt to get workers on board with their company goals (Grant et. al 2009). Addiction programs like Alcoholics Anonymous help reduce rates of recidivism by changing how individuals think about their behaviors (Stevens and Jason 2015, Tracy et al. 2011). Health programs are able to get patients to change health behaviors (Peterson et al. 2014). It is clear that adult socialization does happen, and that certain factors such as peer connection (Stevens and

Jason 2015, Tracy et al. 2011) and accountability (Peterson et al. 2014) influence the occurrence of change in behavior. Several academic disciplines continue to find evidence that adults learn new values, attitudes, and skills once they enter new roles and new organizations. Yet as far back as 1978, attention was being brought to the fact that substantive research areas did not have unified theoretical understandings on how adult socialization happens, how people become competent in their new roles, or how they come to change their views to fit in with new groups (Mortimer and Simmons 1978).

In 2003, Lutfey and Mortimer highlighted this ongoing shortcoming in theories of adult socialization. They critiqued the fact that those studying changes in adult attitudes and behaviors left broader theoretical concerns unaddressed. They called for greater unification of theories of adult socialization that would take into account “personal biography” and “temporality” within the life course (2003). In their critique, personal biography refers to the life background a person has or their experiences - anything that might prime them to respond to socialization attempts in predictable ways. Temporality refers to the path combinations that are common to individuals within this specific time period. As far as understanding temporality in the life course, Lutfey and Mortimer suggest that the variety of paths that are now common in the life course creates new variation in how individuals may respond to adult socialization (2003). For example, the unique combinations of how individuals progress through different roles may influence how open they are to being socialized. Those with senior status in one role may resist being treated as a novice in other roles, and resist attempts of others to socialize them. As a result, temporality within a life course path might affect the capacity for socialization. Thus understanding factors in personality and previous experiences may help us understand the effectiveness of different kinds of socialization for adults (Lutfey and Mortimer 2003).

In their conclusion, Lutfey and Mortimer (2003) echo the previous call to researchers to unify their research on adult socialization with shared theoretical underpinnings. In their suggestions of how to do this they highlight the need for greater understanding of the adult socialization that happens within families as individuals step into new roles:

“While considerable attention has been directed to the stresses attendant on parenthood, divorce, and widowhood, little research has been explicitly concerned with the actual processes of adult socialization to these new roles. In what ways are the potential stresses of the role changes mitigated or intensified by socialization processes? At this time, research would be particularly opportune, given recent shifts in normative expectations that have been stimulated by changing patterns of female labor force participation and by the women's movement.”

However, these calls for a unified theoretical approach to understanding the processes of adult socialization continue to be unanswered. Instead studies of adult socialization remain fragmented in diverse bodies of research that focus primarily on the substantive topic of different kinds of adult socialization, with little attention given to the similarities in the processes of how the socialization takes place for adults.

Given that cultural meaning of what it means to be a “good” parent often varies based on whether the parent is a man or woman (Pedersen 2012, Shirani et. al 2012, Doucet 2006, Townsend 2002), it seems likely that socialization attempts or messages will be gendered. In addition, women have been found to be more likely to do the planning and work associated with maintaining social networks with family and friends (Pederson 2012, Doucet 2006). Because of this they might have increased exposure to socialization through strong as well as casual contacts. Doucet’s (2006) research on men who were primary caregivers, found that it is harder for men to connect with other parents because men are often viewed with suspicion if they are too interested in children. Even with friends, men had a harder time connecting over parenting and discussing the difficulties of parenting because doing so would imply they had

struggles. Struggling and weakness were seen as un-masculine in contemporary society, so men would keep conversations at a surface level with their peers. Women on the other hand may have more opportunity to self-reveal their weaknesses without having their value as a woman called into question (Doucet 2006). This ability to self-reveal may also allow women to access greater knowledge and resources on parenting through their peer networks. Furthermore, women often serve as gatekeepers to their own children (Holmes et, al 2013) and may influence the socialization of fathers through gatekeeping techniques.

### **Theoretical Influences**

Parents that have internalized aspects of intensive parenting as part of their own identity may be more likely to defend or pass on their own parenting ideals in their everyday social interactions. Whereas individuals with less developed parent identities may be more flexible in learning from others as they come in contact. Two theoretical frameworks seem helpful in trying to build an overarching theory of parent socialization. First, the symbolic interactionism framework describes the way that meaning is created and shared through social interactions with ourselves and with others (Blumer 1969). Second, identity theory addresses how we see ourselves and create identities based on the roles we hold (Stryker 2008). Together they help explain how an individual can learn meanings about the term “parent” through social interactions with others, and then interpret those meanings for themselves. This helps create an identity standard in their mind that they can refer to as the ideal parent or who they want to be, and then work to make that their personal identity or who they are.

### **Symbolic Interactionism**

In the theoretical framework outlined by Blumer, individuals learn the meaning of things through their social interaction with others, but they also negotiate these meanings through a



social interaction with themselves (Collins 1994, Blumer 1969). Blumer calls this social interaction with the self an “interpretive process”. Both social interactions occur in a similar fashion. In the case of interacting with others, one person first calls attention to an object or thing. These objects or things do not have to be physical but can be anything a person can direct someone’s awareness to. Once both parties are focused on the thing, the first person acts toward the object in a way that communicates the meaning of the object to the other person. This communication can be verbal or nonverbal. The person who is noticing the actions of the first individual can understand the meaning of the object or the thing because they are able to temporarily imagine themselves occupying in the same position of the other person (Collins 1994, Blumer 1969).

Shared meaning, which is originally gained during interactions with others, is then further understood through a social interaction that individuals have with themselves (Collins 1994, Blumer 1969). Again, individuals must be able to indicate or point out the thing or the object to themselves before they can consider it. After the individual calls their own attention to the thing, they engage in a dialogue between the parts of their self that represent both subject and object. By being able to step into the roles of specific others or to understand the perspective of multiple others, the person is able to move back and forth in dialogue between the different perspectives. Through this process they interpret the meaning of the thing for themselves (Collins 1994, Blumer 1969). During such an interpretive process, Blumer points out that an individual “selects, checks, suspends, regroupes, and transforms the meanings [of the thing] in the light of the situation in which he is placed” (Blumer 1969). That is, the individual interprets and negotiates their own meanings while giving consideration to their social interactions with others and their own location within the social order (Blumer 1969). As parents are exposed to ideas

about the parent role during their interactions with others they have the opportunity to evaluate and interpret these ideas and meanings for themselves. Parents can accept, reject, or modify what others share with them about what it means to be a parent. They can then use their own interpreted meanings to guide their actions as a parent.

## **Identity Theory**

Identity theory in part addresses how individuals choose to identify themselves (Stryker 2008). Developed out of the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism, identity theory applies and further develops understandings of how meanings related to the self and identities. An identity is often developed through interactions where individuals have specific role relations to other individuals within a social structure or organized social group. As individuals work to carry out roles, they often develop identities, or a sense of self, based on their own social roles. Identity theory acknowledges that individuals have many roles and therefore may have many identities that make up an overall identity (Stryker 2008).

Furthermore, the commitment to and the salience of certain identities for an individual, influences how often that identity is used as the orienting identity across a multitude of social contexts (Stryker 2008). For example, an individual who is a parent may find that s/he regularly evaluates situations from a parental perspective. Even though the individual may also have a child identity, their parent identity is more prominent to their current overall self-identification. Therefore, they think and are motivated to act more by this salient identity even within situations where they are not expected to fulfill the role of a parent.

In theorizing about identity, Stryker (2008) has recognized the importance of an individual's ability to take different perspectives in regard to themselves as part of the process for developing an identity. He points to Mead's theory of socialization, a precursor to symbolic

interactionism, which included ideas about two parts of a self: the “I” or the subject and the “Me” or the part of the self that could take itself as an object (Mead 1934). This allowance of movement within one’s own mind is the reflexive part of the self that symbolic interactionism highlights as the “interpretive process” or the part where we have social interactions with ourselves within our own mind (Blumer 1969). Stryker encourages further research to bridge the gaps between identity theory and symbolic interactionism to create testable and predictive theory (Stryker 2008).

To be able to identify yourself as something, means you are able to point out meanings related to yourself. For example, a parent in my study may identify themselves as a good parent. They are not just fulfilling a role, but they are identifying their performance of that role as being a part of what gives meaning to them as an individual. Identity therefore refers to how individuals perceive and evaluate themselves (Stryker 2008).

The perceptions and evaluations used to identify what it means to be a specific individual do not come out of nowhere though (Stryker 2008). They are based on an accepted ideal, which serves as a measuring stick and is called the identity standard. Individuals reference the identity standard to see how they measure up. If they cannot approximate the identity standard then usually, they stop trying to identify with it, or they question the identity standard. Those that are able to approximate the identity standard are usually fine to hold it in place and therefore perpetuate it as the ideal (Stryker 2008).

Individuals learn identity standards through social interactions with others. They can then accept, refine, or reject these standards, but the ubiquity of certain standards (intensive parenting ideals) suggests that in the beginning most new parents do not immediately reject the identity

standard, which is built around intensive parenting. To understand this part of the socialization process, the social interactions that expose individuals to these ideals are worth analyzing.

It is also important however to understand the approximation between individual's current role identity and the identity standard they hold. In the case of parents, the role identity would be how they see themselves as a parent, and the identity standard might be the intensive parenting ideal that they have accepted. When a person's role identity does not closely approximate the identity standard, individuals are motivated to reduce the discrepancy, often by making personal changes to themselves to become more like the standard (Burke 2006). If they are continually unable to approximate the standard they may release the identity standard and align with a new, different standard they are better able to approximate (Burke 2006). Greater gaps may signify a looser sense of self and might present trustworthy agents of socialization a better opportunity for socialization attempts.

## **Research Questions**

The primary aim of this research is to better understand intensive parenting culture, particularly how parents become socialized into it and thus perpetuate it. Drawing out the inner dialogue of the interpretive process that individuals go through as they evaluate shared identity standards on parenting gives insight in this regard.

Using the framework of symbolic interactionism and identity theory to guide this research, I seek to uncover and identify the day to day social interactions from which parents learn what it means to be a parent. We know that most middle-class parents are exposed at some point to intensive parenting ideals, and that many modern parents uphold and therefore reproduce intensive parenting culture (Mintz 2014). What we don't know however is which social

interactions impact individuals strongly or deeply enough to result in acceptance of the ideas being shared. Nor do we know when these interactions are occurring during the life course.

I also use identity theory to evaluate the internal negotiations of individual parents related to their parent role. While symbolic interactionism can be used to understand any concept or thing which has meaning to multiple people (Blumer 1969), identity theory helps us understand how individuals adopt, internalize, and rework meanings associated with their own roles (Stryker 2008). This is especially relevant to roles that strongly factor into how an individual identifies or views themselves. Identity theory predicts that those who are unable to approximate identity standards will either alter their internalized identity standard, or they will shift away from trying to incorporate that specific identity as a prominent part of their overall self (Stryker 2008). This study will examine this process for parents, looking to see how parents work to either align their identity with what others have indicated it means to be a good parent, or how parents renegotiate meanings related to identity standards.

In broad terms this study also seeks to identify any patterns in the effectiveness of different socialization attempts. As adults, parents have more autonomy and can more easily seek out socialization and/or resist others' attempts to socialize them. In examining the socialization of parents as a form of adult socialization, I want to see if certain factors are present in socialization attempts where parents choose to accept shared meanings about the parent role. The specific research questions I address in this dissertation are as follows:

1. How do parents become socialized into their parent roles?
  - a. Who, or what, are the agents of socialization from which parents learn the standards of intensive parenting?

- b. How do parents negotiate the identity standard meanings shared by different agents or approaches of socialization attempts?
- 2. What are the mechanisms and processes of adult socialization?
  - a. How does identity matter?
  - b. What are the identity standards to which parents hold themselves?
  - c. What do cases with larger gaps between identity and the identity standard reveal?
- 3. How is the cultural ideal of intensive parenting being continually upheld or reproduced?
  - a. Do socialized parents with close approximation to identity standards make more attempts to socialize others?
  - b. In what ways does this happen?
- 4. Are the agents of socialization different for mothers and fathers?
  - a. Do mothers have greater exposure to parenting socialization than fathers?
  - b. Do mothers serve as agents of socialization to fathers?

In answering these questions, I find evidence for why intensive parenting retains its strong hold among middle class parents. I go beyond just understanding that it is prevalent to finding out how and why it is being socially reproduced. I find evidence that adults' increased agency allows them to choose their own social networks, which means they are mostly socialized only by those they choose to socially interact or communicate with. Gender dynamics do appear to be part of the reason why intensive parenting is being socially reproduced. I find that women are not only asking their partners to take on more intensive parenting tasks, but they are teaching men how to do them and men are learning and accepting the importance of doing so. Therefore, an effective socialization takes place when men believe that intensive parenting is important and they participate in the execution of intensive parenting. I also further develop theory of adult

socialization through revealing potential connections between identity importance, identity performance, and the likelihood of socialization occurring.

## CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

I used qualitative methods to complete this research because it was the best method for answering my type of research questions. Most of my overarching research questions focus on questions about processes, meaning questions concerned with *why* and *how* something is happening. A few of the questions I asked may have been reproducible in a written survey form, such as one of my main questions about parental performance where I ask parents to rate themselves on a scale of 1 to 10. However, I use a series of follow up questions to ask parents why they gave themselves a specific rating and I ask them to describe a perfect 10 parent. These follow up questions helped me understand the kinds of comparisons and standards they used when evaluating their own performance. These follow up questions would not likely receive as much explanation in a written survey form, as most people do not want to write out long answers on surveys. However, using in-depth interviews makes it easier for people to talk at length about their thoughts and experiences.

Other methods do not lend themselves as well to answering questions of why or how because you need a storied context to see how a process unfolded from beginning to middle to end. This type of in-depth data is best produced through talk, where unique follow up questions can be used to clarify and expand upon what has already been shared. Some follow up questions can be outlined ahead of time, but other follow ups are only thought of in the moment by the researcher because they know they need more information. Developing this free-flowing conversation and getting research participants to open up is part of the craft of qualitative techniques. When it is mastered researchers have greater flexibility in keeping the data collection process going when issues of confusion or tiredness or distrust arise because they can immediately clarify, encourage, or shift interviewing efforts to focus on building rapport. Having



the researcher present allows for these saves to happen, whereas other approaches may lose the opportunity to collect data after the first participant barrier arises.

To get in-depth explanations on processes one needs an in-depth data collection technique. I used in-depth interviews because they were the most convenient qualitative method for getting answers to my research questions. Through interviews I was able to gather rich, in-depth storylines demonstrating how socialization occurred or unfolded over time. I was able to gather information about personal histories which gave insight into the reasons why parents were involved in intensive parenting. Other qualitative approaches such as ethnography were considered, but this would have taken more time and more resources compared to in-depth interviews which could still produce viable data. Ethnography would have also proven difficult to continue during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic started in the United States about half-way through my data collection phase and I needed to make a switch in my interviewing to include interviews completed via Zoom.

Spending time in-person and observing social interactions during the pandemic would not have been possible. This means in some ways I am relying on the face value of the stories that have been shared with me, instead of my own direct observations of the socialization process unfolding. However, my research participants only knew that I wanted to talk to them about their experiences as a parent. They did not know what my research questions were or what I was looking for within the stories and perspectives they shared with me, so in this way they probably were not biased in trying to shape my impressions. Furthermore, what I did find out through my research on how socialization occurred would have taken multiple years within individual family settings to fully observe. This would have made the data collection phase much more difficult to complete, while revealing similar outcomes.

For my in-depth interviews I used a semi-structured interview guide. To come up with the original interview questions I first outlined subsections that focused on themes, such as background about becoming a parent, parental self-image and standards for comparison, intensive parenting practices, agents of socialization, and responses to socialization. Within these subsections I developed questions based on my research objectives. I used a combination of best practices for qualitative question writing, feedback from advisors and qualitative workgroups, as well as indications from prior literature, to work out what questions to include and how to phrase them.

The interview guide was then developed and adjusted through pilot interviews, which were not included as part of the data analyzed in this research. I completed 8 pilot interviews in which I tried out different questions to see how effective they were in producing the kind of data needed to answer my research questions. These pilot interviews were necessary for weeding out questions that did not elicit good data, and for helping me refine the questions that did make it into the final interview schedule.

When using my semi-structured interview guide there were some questions that were asked in the same way and the same order every time. For example, the question, “If you were to rate yourself as a parent on a scale of 1 to 10, what would you rate yourself?” was asked the same way every time. The ordering of other questions that were meant to elicit information on the standards parents used to make comparison were specifically ordered in a way where parents were asked to share viewpoints about themselves first, before they shared viewpoints on other parents, including those they negatively judged. This was done to keep participants from changing how they evaluated themselves based on any realization that they had negatively judged others and now would also have to be judged or evaluated.

The beginning two sections of the interview guide, relating to background as a parent and self-image as a parent, were the most similar across all interviews. These questions were posed in each interview and they were completed in the same order. Later sections and interview questions varied moderately from interview to interview depending on how much participants shared when asked questions from the first two sections. For example, many participants would open up and share great detail about their personal history, including stories and examples that would answer questions outlined later in the interview schedule. When this happened, I would skip over later questions that would have been redundant. This helped me keep most interviews within a 2-hour time limit while still getting quality data.

The Extended Case Method oriented these research techniques. In the Extended Case Method, pre-existing theories are applied and “extended” into new areas in order to see how they fit (Burawoy 1998). In the case of this study I seek to extend theories of symbolic interactionism and identity theory into the area of adult socialization by using the case of intensive parenting. The goal of this method is to create better and more refined theory (Burawoy 1998). Insights into the case of parenting as a form of adult socialization will help create more unified theory on adult socialization in general.

I specifically intervene extending the theoretical concepts of symbolic interactionism and identity theory into the area of intensive parenting. In this research I look for evidence of the socializing aspects outlined in symbolic interactionism, such as the *sharing of meaning*, and the *acceptance or renegotiation of meanings* that would indicate effective socialization. I also pay attention to *rejection of meanings* which would indicate failed socialization.

In the theory of symbolic interactionism, sharing and interpreting meanings can be involved with anything that can be assigned meaning, whether tangible or intangible. Identity

theory utilizes this framework to look at identity as a special type of thing for which meaning can be socially taught. In this regard I specifically intervene to look for evidence of concepts related to identity theory within the experiences of my participants. These concepts include *identity standards*, *identity importance*, and *identity performance*. Taking on a certain identity often means stepping into a role and performing that role (Stryker 2008). *Identity performance* indicates how well someone is performing their identity role. *Identity standards* are the comparison measure used to evaluate this performance, and they indicate what the ideals are for someone with a certain identity, such as a father or a husband (Stryker 2008). Identity standards and identity performances are a unique category of thing to which humans assign meaning, and these meanings are shared or taught through social interaction (Stryker 2008).

I also look for evidence of *identity importance*, which is an indication of how important it is for an individual to hold onto a certain identity (Stryker 2008). The greater the importance of the identity the less likely the individual is to step away from that identity and the associated role. This is different from identity salience, which indicates the likelihood that an identity will be called up across different types of social contexts because it is more prominent (Stryker 2008). Identity importance matters when researching socialization because it can indicate motivation, which may affect teaching and learning processes.

Looking for evidence of these theoretical concepts within my interviews allows me to see how well these theories apply to at least one form of adult socialization: intensive parenting. In this way I extend the prior theory into a new area to check it for fit. To the extent that they fit, I can use these theories to help build a baseline theory on adult socialization that can then be tested in other contexts.

## **Recruiting and Sampling**

The main requirement for being a participant in this study was that the interviewed respondents have one or more children under the age of 18 currently living in their home. Potential participants were told that participation in the study meant completing a 1-2 hour interview about their parenthood experiences. For this study I used snowball sampling to find potential research participants. Snowball sampling works by using participants' connections with others to generate lists of further potential participants. To take advantage of this method I used both my personal and professional networks as starting points. If participants recommended others I contacted the potential participant via email, calling, or text message – depending on what the recommender thought was the best way to contact them.

My snowball starting points included a couple of parent groups that I had participated in for multiple years, the yoga studio where I worked out, my church group, my graduate school friends, and the network of one of my dissertation advisors. This gave me six snowballs. The point of using multiple starting points for snowball samples is to make sure that as a researcher I would not accidentally tap into only one unique subgroup without realizing it. Such homogeneity would mean results are only meaningful within the narrow context of that subgroup. Although qualitative research is not statistically representative, it does seek to cover diverse types of people that exist within the defined study population. Doing this allows me to examine how stories are similar or different across various types of people.

I recruited primarily in the beginning by talking to people I knew to see if they knew anyone that fit my research criteria. I was surprised when the snowball from my first parenting group only yielded 3 interviews. This group had about 20 women in it and I had participated in the group for over 3 years after being invited to participate by a local artist friend whose

daughter had been close friends with my “foster” daughter. The group met once a month and swapped recipes and if it was someone’s birthday month everyone brought them gifts. On my first birthday month I was surprised by all the expensive birthday gifts I received; however, when so many of the ladies turned me down to be interviewed, I realized I hadn’t built up as much rapport as I had previously thought. One woman even told me that she wished she could help me, but that she wouldn’t be able to commit to the one hour I had asked. She then immediately turned around and told another lady that she and her husband wanted to do a couple’s dinner sometime. She proceeded to talk about how they could get together pretty much any night because they were flexible. I do not know if I was never fully accepted into the group because there was an obvious class difference. Many of these women talked about going on foreign vacations, buying investment properties, and being married to men that made a lot of money. We would rotate whose house we met at each month and everyone but me lived in homes built in the last 10 years many of which had vaulted ceilings, home theaters, 4 car garages, and professional landscaping. For whatever reason I was never asked to host. I just assumed that was out of courtesy knowing I could not fit that many people into my apartment, but now I honestly do not know if people thought I did not really belong there and they were just going through the motions of “accepting” me because my friend was well connected. I cannot fully be certain, but contrasting this with my next group which was much more open to participating in my research, left me thinking my conclusion was correct.

The second parenting group was much easier to tap into and that snowball yielded 8 interviews. I had been participating in this group for less than a year at the invitation of one of the group’s organizers. It was a more formalized support group, and anyone could come, although we met in a private residence every other week for 1 hour. There was more structure to

this group and a presentation was given each week with time for discussion questions at the end. Sometimes I was asked to give presentations, which I was happy to do. The group was less homogenous than the other parenting group I had participated in. There were ladies in the group that only spoke Spanish and needed a translator. Participants were encouraged to come late or leave early if their schedules did not allow much time. There were women that needed financial help and often showed up in tattered sweats with baby spit up on them, sitting with other attendees that were dressed in fitted suits, high heels, and had styled hair and full-face makeup applied. You could see that there were differences in the cars that people drove as well. Some people did not have cars and had to be picked up to get to the meetings, some had older cars with sun-cracked peeling paint, and others had brand new SUVs parked out front. I think my advanced education was something that people respected within the group and they often wanted me to tell them if I knew about any research on the topic at hand.

The snowball from my yoga studio resulted in 5 interviews. I did not know any of these people personally, but they had been recommended to me by the different instructors I knew. In using my local church congregation as a recruiting network, I specifically asked to be referred to people that I did not already know (i.e. mutual friends from church). I made this specific request because there is a norm in my church that when people ask for help with something people are very enthusiastic about trying to help. Sometimes they are so enthusiastic that it ends up being counterproductive. If I had asked for help finding people that met only the basic criteria for my study (parents with at least one child under 18), then it is entirely possible I could have quickly lined up 60 interviews with participants that met this criteria, but happened to also all be from the same small homogenous religious group. By asking to be introduced to people that were not mutual contacts I knew I was more likely to get diversity outside of this group in the

recommended sample. I think this proved correct given that so many of the people I talked to said they didn't really know anyone they could recommend outside of people we both knew at church. My recruiting in this group led to only 4 interviews.

Recruiting through my grad school peers resulted in a small 4 interviewee snowball. My committee member's network proved to be the most fruitful. She helped me by sending a description of my study to some of her email contacts and she also posted it on her social media account with my contact information. This resulted in a snowball sample of 10 participants.

Beyond these starting points, I had to get more creative with how to find potential participants. Once my research expanded to include parents throughout the United States, I was able to use help from my high school and undergrad friends, along with my extended family network to find people. Because I did not want my sample to be an overly homogenous reflection of my own social networks, I steered away from interviewing people within my close friends and family. Instead I asked them to help me find people that fit my criteria, but that were not members of my primary social groups. Using these networks yielded another 21 interviews.

It was important to have single parents within my sample because if these parents are responsive to socialization attempts these cases could potentially showcase how effective socialization processes within intensive parenting culture work. Most single parents have to find ways to make limited resources stretch farther. If even single parents try to make similar investments into their children when resources are already spread thin it would show that socialization into intensive parenting is effective even for those that feel greater stress over managing their time, money, and emotional energy. On the other hand, if single parents are not responsive to attempts to socialize them, this may be due to the fact that their experiences as



single parents could prime them to resist the ideals of those who are in different family situations. During my recruiting I was able to find 7 single mothers and 2 single fathers.

### **Conducting Interviews and Overcoming the Covid-19 Pandemic**

Interviews took place in various locations including homes, work offices, coffee shops, and online. The Covid19 pandemic started when I had roughly half of my interviews completed, and as a way to continue meeting with participants the second half of my interviews were completed online using Zoom video calling. The original location for my research was Pullman, WA and Moscow, ID, which was a good choice for data collection because there is a large population of parents (which was my target population), but there is also some amount of diversity with regards to work experiences, religious backgrounds, and political affiliations. I was able to complete 30 interviews in this location; however, after struggling to get enough interviews in this area once the Covid19 pandemic began I expanded my location to include parents from around the U.S. The other 25 interviews were collected from mothers and fathers in Oregon, California, Utah, Oklahoma, Tennessee, New Jersey, Texas, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Virginia, Alabama, Colorado, and Nebraska.

For two parent families, I deliberately tried to get both partners to participate in my study; however, if only one person was willing to participate, I still interviewed them and included them in the study. Having data for some couples allowed me to analyze similarities and differences between those partners' interviews but interviewing just one parent when that was all I could recruit was a compromise which allowed me to interview more parents overall.

### **Sample Characteristics**

There were 55 research participants in the study, and each completed an in-depth interview pertaining to their experience of being a parent. Interviews lasted between 1-2 hours,

with most being completed in 1 hour and 15 minutes. I had 10 couples where I interviewed both mothers and fathers, 15 interviews where I interviewed only the mother, 11 interviews where I interviewed only the father, 7 interviews with single mothers, and 2 interviews with single fathers. There were 32 mothers and 23 fathers in my sample. All couples and parents were heterosexual. For couples where I interviewed both parents, each parent was interviewed separately and on a different day. Parents ranged in age from 30-57, with most parents in my sample being mid 30s to early 40s. The majority of my participants (44) identified themselves as white. However, other self-identifications included 6 Latinos, 1 Korean American, 1 Pacific Islander, 1 Native American/German, 1 Japanese/White, and 1 Hispanic/White. Parents had a range of 1-6 children, with most parents having 2 kids. Kids ranged in age from 1-17 years old.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Gender		Education	
Women	32	GED or High School	2
Men	23	Certification	1
Race		Some College	8
White	44	Associates	3
Latino	6	Bachelors	16
Other	5	Masters	10
Religion		Doctorate	15
Christian	23	Marital Status	
Belief in God	3	Married	46
Non-Religious	29	Single (Divorced)	7
Home Ownership		Single (Widowed)	1
Yes	46	Cohabiting	1
No	9	Age	
Income		30-34	16
Less than \$44K	1	35-39	16
\$45K to \$99K	25	40-44	11
\$100K to \$250K	28	45-49	7
More than 250K	1	50+	5

I used multiple indicators to try to measure the social class of my research participants. These indicators primarily included annual household income, level of education, occupation, and home ownership. Annual household income ranged from \$30,000 - \$500,000; however, the end points were outliers. 95% of my sample had incomes between \$45,000-250,000. Education level included 2 participants with GEDs or a high school diploma, 1 with a technical degree, 8 had some college, 3 had associate's degrees, 16 had bachelor's, 10 had masters, and 15 had doctorate degrees. 46 participants were homeowners and 9 lived in rentals.

Most participants could easily be classified as middle-class, but for research purposes a distinction was made between lower middle-class and upper middle-class. Lower middle-class roughly encompassed those with annual household incomes between \$45,000-99,000 who had some college or a bachelor's degree and were homeowners. Upper middle-class roughly encompassed those with annual incomes between \$100,000-250,000 who had graduate degrees and were homeowners.

For cases that could not be easily categorize based on the primary class indicators, other information was used to clarify class. Other indicators used to define upper middle-class included whether the research participant spoke about having excess money or resources during their interview, whether they spoke about being able to help others financially, and/or whether they described going on expensive family vacations regularly. Other indicators used to define lower middle-class included interview references to needing family help with money or childcare, or references to relying on church or charity groups as a safety net. Using these distinctions, 25 cases were categorized as lower middle-class and 28 were categorized as upper middle-class. I had two outlier cases as well. One was categorized as low income based on an overall household income of \$30,000, and one was categorized as upper class based on an

overall household income of \$500,000. Further information on class background pertinent to individual cases is specified within later chapters.

### **Questions Asked in the Interview**

In this section I give an overview of the types of questions that were used to gather data. I started interviews by asking parents if they could tell me about their journey into parenthood. For many participants this broad question helped to get them talking and feeling comfortable opening up about their personal history and story. Many individuals would tell me about how they met their partner and the story of how their family got started. If they did not share as part of their story, I would ask them if they always wanted to be a parent and if they did anything to prepare before becoming a parent.

To measure identity performance and identity standards I asked participants to use a 1-10 scale to measure their own performance. I asked them to tell me why they gave themselves the rating they did and then I asked what a perfect 10 parent would be like. Later in the interview I also asked what it means to be a good parent. These questions helped me understand the identity standards against which parents were comparing themselves. The number that parents rated themselves, along with their explanation of why they gave that rating, gave me an idea of how they say their own identity performance.

To get at whether parents were intensively parenting I asked them about the kinds of things they did for their children, including separate questions about time, emotional energy, and financial investments. I also asked about how becoming a parent has changed their life. Furthermore, I asked parents if their children expect more of them than they expected of their own parents.

Agents of socialization and example of socialization often came out fluidly throughout the interview as parents talked about different parts of their story. I did not always have to ask. However, in some interviews I did ask, “Who would you say has influenced you as a parent?” I also asked a series of questions about when parenting comes up as a topic of conversation and about whether parents ever feel judged in their parenting.

Demographic questions were asked in an open-ended format. For example, to measure age I asked, “What is your age?”. To measure race I asked, “What is your race?”. In this way I also asked for marital status, occupation, and spouses’ occupation. Home ownership was measured by asking, “Do you own your own home, or do you rent?”. Income was measured by asking, “What would you say is your average annual household income?”. This open-ended format helps keep the feeling of the qualitative interview consistent.

This basic ordering was kept in all interviews. Some of the specific questions or follow up questions were not asked if the participant covered that information during an earlier part of the interview. However, the format of questions in each interview remained fairly similar from one interview to the next. The ordering of questions also remained the same, with the exception of skipping over questions that had already been answered earlier. The full list of interview questions can be found in the appendix at the end of this document.

## **Coding and Analysis**

I transcribed interviews using Express Scribe Pro transcription software which allowed me to speed up, slow down, and pause audio as I was typing by using a foot pedal. At the time of transcription all study participants were assigned a pseudonym, along with pseudonyms for any spouse or child(ren) names referenced within the interview. After interviews were transcribed, I used NVivo coding software to code interview transcripts. I started by spending some time

rereading some of my earlier interviews to try to get a general feel for my data. First, I did open coding just to get a feel for common themes. I then moved forward in creating codes based on factors I knew I needed to assess based on my research questions. Using theory to orient myself, I selected and revises codes that were specific to my research questions. After sorting data based on these early codes, I shifted to the creation of analytical codes for comparing and contrasting subcategories.

I coded the cases of *socialization* identified in my interviews and used branching code to categorize which *types of socializing agents* were doing the socialization. I coded cases of parents describing their ideas of what the best parent looks like as *identity standards*, and then coded the *identity gaps* between the ideal standard a parent identified and their personal assessment of themselves. Whenever parents gave descriptions of their own identities as parents throughout interviews, I coded these as *examples of identity*. For identity standards and examples of identity I used branch codes to note similar themes between parents. I then analyzed these themes to see how they related to intensive parenting ideology. For each of these areas, I used demographic characteristics to see if any prominent differences among certain groups existed.

Types of socializing agents were examined for mothers and fathers to see if there were any noticeable differences in these agents. In cases where spouses were the socializing agent, I coded themes such as *deference*, *control*, *tension*, and *feedback*. In cases of feedback I used branch codes to indicate what kinds of things the feedback related to. I also coded interview examples of parent's *attempts to socialize others*. These examples were sub coded for themes including *compassion* for other parents, *negative judgements* of others, and *self-reflections*.

To analyze what the gaps between identity and identity standards mean, I split the identity gap code into wider and narrower groups to see if there were differences in the way parents *enacted parenting* or worked at *renegotiating identity standards*. Parenting enacted was split into many different sub-codes indicating the types of examples given. Other interesting codes emerged separate from codes that were guided by the research questions of the study. These emerging codes included example of parents talking about *loneliness or isolation*, *small support systems*, and importance of teaching children *emotional regulation* as a way to cope with uncertain times.

### **Statement of Research Positionality**

It's interesting for me to think about my positionality and how it may have affected my research. As a woman I think people felt comfortable opening up to me, especially after the first fifteen minutes, because of our society's cultural expectations that women will listen and provide direct attention to things that people feel emotional about. I was surprised by how many participants in my study, including both men and women, started to cry at some point during their interview, which to me was a positive sign that I had made them feel like they could be genuine and vulnerable in their expressions. I also know it is reflective of the fact that my research digs into family relationships that are close to people's heartstrings. Nobody started crying in a negative way. Most of them just cried because they were touched by what their spouse or children meant to them. One woman cried because she said she felt like the interview helped her see that she does a lot more as a mom than she was giving herself credit for.

With a couple of the older fathers it became clear that they would not meet with me unless their spouse was present. I know this is a norm among older generations and it didn't bother me. More impactful than this though seemed to be some men's willingness to meet with

me only if I could come to their workplaces. I interviewed 8 fathers at their employment location. One sat down with me at his desk, but most of them had me follow them around while they were working so that they could multitask.

I usually tried to dress up in business casual for most of my interviews and we met in public places or in the participant's homes (sometimes via Zoom). I think this allowed me to minimize differences in class status because I seemed professional and well-educated. However, there were multiple times that I walked away from interviews thinking that these people had so much money.

Given the nature of this research it seems fitting to address my own parental status. Throughout my research process I presented myself as both an insider at times and an outsider at times, using my own ambiguous parental status to my advantage. My husband and I are not traditional parents in that we have never had any children, but we did spend roughly three years raising a teenage family member. This family member originally came to live with us because she had experience significant trauma and was suicidal as a result. Her parents were desperate to help her and willing to try anything. My husband proposed that she come live with us and her parents felt it was worth a try. We worked out that they would send us \$500 a month to cover her food and other expenses, but beyond that we were her full-time parents. We made all the judgement calls related to school, healthcare, privileges and consequences, etc. We had full legal custody so that we could do anything we needed to do for her benefit. Her parents inherently trusted us to do what was best for her. If we recommended something, they would support us - usually financially - in being able to carry it out.

I advocated for our teenager to get the mental health support that she needed, and I advocated for her in school. My husband and I both spent many hours tutoring her in her



homework, and long hours listening to her talk about things that happened in her social life at school. I felt like I was always driving, driving, driving, driving – to and from school, to music lessons, to counseling and doctor appointments, to youth activities, to “can we go to the store right now for a snack”, etc. I had a hard time saying no at first and wondered if me holding anything back for myself made me a bad parent. Overtime I became better about setting up some boundaries like making her ride the public transportation to and from the high school.

It was hard for some people to grasp what we were doing, or what our relationship dynamic was like. I often found myself telling people that we were foster parents, not because we had any connection to the foster care system, but because people could understand the concept of raising a child that isn’t yours with some amount of outside financial support. They could grasp that quickly and I figured it was close enough. People that knew us more intimately knew that she was a family member though.

I did have significant experience with children before she came to live with us though. I am the second oldest of six children and I often cared for my younger siblings growing up. I also had many cousins in my extended family that I would watch regularly. During the summers when I was an undergrad my aunts and uncles would have me come stay with their kids for multiple weeks while they went on adult only vacations. When I turned 18 my parents asked if they could list me in their will to become the legal guardian of any minor children should they both die. Two other extended family couples asked me at different times in later years if they could list me for the same thing.

Despite my experience with kids I was shocked at how much was required of me to parent a teenager. I knew very young children needed a lot, but I had assumed parenting a teenager would be more like having another roommate who just needed a little mentoring. I was

very wrong. Our teenager meant she had great emotional needs that required much attention, but she also wanted to have complete adult level autonomy when it came to privileges. She would often sneak into our room and sleep at the foot of our bed at night or ask for me to read her bedtime stories to go to sleep, but then she would insist that she could manage a cell phone as an independent adult and that she should not have to tell us where she was going when she went out with friends.

We also had the unenjoyable times of realizing we needed to help her get STD testing after she supposedly was not being sexually active, or getting calls from police officers related to underage drinking, or dealing with the aftermath of serious self-harming. Afterward I often felt frustrated when people around me, mostly from church, would ask why we did not just send her back to live with her real parents after stressful situations occurred. I guess that would have made it easier for us, but I was not motivated by what was best for us. I was concerned with what I thought was best for her, and I didn't think sending her back would be the best thing for her. In this aspect I think I was able to relate to a lot of the parents that I interviewed.

Given this personal backdrop, I played with the ambiguity of my role as a parent. At times I would indicate that I could relate to their experience as a way to let them know I understood them and that further explanation of something wouldn't be lost on me. I also used my personal experience to let people know I wouldn't negatively judge them when they seemed hesitant to reveal much detail. For example, one mother mentioned her son getting into trouble and the police were called. She brushed past it trying to explain that it was a weird situation that should not have happened, but I said, "We've dealt with teenagers and the police." After I said that she seemed relieved and was willing to open up in detail when I asked follow-up questions

about how she felt about the situation now compared to when it happened, and how the conversations with her partner had gone regarding this issue.

At other times I strategically did not reveal that I knew anything about parenting if I thought it would skew someone's honest answer. In these cases, I could tell that participants were explaining things in greater detail because they thought they were teaching me about something I did not know. One participant said, "This is how it is for parents" and then went on to describe something as if I was only researching this topic because I must not have firsthand experience. A few times people said, "Someday when you have kids you'll see..." and then they would go on to explain something about parental experience that they assumed was ubiquitous. In these cases I did not really need to probe to get them to clarify. Instead I just did not correct any of their assumptions. If I had indicated I had experience parenting I think they would have glossed over their explanations instead of trying to educate the uneducated.

While every good qualitative researcher tries to be aware of and check their biases, I am aware that my personal experiences with parenting do not leave me unbiased on this topic. However, if my biases affected the way I interpreted data it would be towards a positive interpretation of what my interviewees reported in their interviews. I would often think things like, "These are just really decent people," when I was collecting and transcribing interviews.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of my research methods generally include the same limitations of any qualitative research. Sampling is not random or large enough for findings to be representative of any larger population. However, instead of sampling for representation, the method suggests sampling for diversity across groups to make sure the researcher is not ignorantly sampling a uniquely partitioned group compared to what the research questions intended to focus on. The

main method to achieve this is to start multiple snowball samples within unrelated groups. These efforts led me to have decent breadth in gender and age, but I was unable to sample very broadly for race. Although race is one of the predominant social factors that sociologists regularly find impacts outcomes, I cannot speak to how it matters for parenting ideals.

Similarly, I was not able to sample low-income parents. I originally did not intend to limit my sample to parents from middle-class backgrounds, but as my sample naturally grew there were no low-income families. I did try for a time to specifically recruit families that were low-income by asking local people to put me in contact with families they knew who struggled financially. I also used my connections with youth at the high school to help me be aware of families whose children had free or reduced lunch. In all these efforts multiple people were suggested, but the degrees of separation seemed to be too many for any of the parents of these children to agree to being interviewed. Sometimes the youth seemed eager to help out their peer who knew me, but the feedback I received indicated that their parents were either dismissive or reluctant. As a result I do not have data from low-income families to compare to the middle-class families in this study.

This qualitative research also bears some of the limitations of trusting in first-hand accounts. Individuals may not recall memories correctly and research participants may report perceptions of reality versus accurate reflections of reality. However, symbolic interactionism supports the argument that accepted meanings influence the real world regardless of accuracy because once they are accepted as truth they motivate certain kinds of action (Blumer 1969). In this way, not all perceptions need reflect a historical reality for these perceptions to affect how people act or how they think about the social world. How people think about and internalize

identity standards is a main focus of this study, so qualitative methods are appropriate for learning how this is done.

Another limitation of the study is that participants self-selected into participation within the study and therefore may have unique characteristics. One characteristic that I find evidence of, is that participants for the most part see themselves very positively in terms of their own parenting. Those that are less confident or feel negative about themselves regarding parenting are less likely to participate because they want to avoid focusing on something that makes them feel less than. Efforts to recruit parents that were struggling to feel good about their parenthood were limited. I told people I was interested in hearing about the “struggles and experiences” of parents, but this did not bring an outpouring of individuals that saw themselves as less than average in their performance.

Further limitations unique to this specific study include the change part way through the study from in person interview to interviews completed online via Zoom. This change was made to accommodate social distancing requirements due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Although the recorded data I was able to obtain was similar to prior interviews, the data that I would usually take in as part of my field notes was much more limited. Typically, I would meet with participants in their homes, place of work, or some public space. Often when I was invited to homes and offices there was a lot of information I could pick up about people. Their regular lives would often momentarily interrupt our interviews giving me a glimpse into what some of their interactions with spouse and children look like. When I completed interview via Zoom it was nice to be able to read facial expressions, but beyond that I usually saw a head with a blurred out background when I was completing interviews. Way of dressing, body language, and surrounding environment give off clues to who a person is (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). To

a large extent this additional information was lost for my Zoom participants. While this was a downside to completing interviews via Zoom, this mode did allow me to expand my interviews to include parents from 13 other states, which furthered the diversified my overall sample.

### **Overview of Remaining Chapters**

The coming chapters address how intensive parenting remains the dominant cultural ideology among parents. After giving evidence that intensive parenting is the norm among the parents of this study, Chapter 3 examines which agents of socialization led parents into their accepted interpretations of good parenting. Chapter 4 looks deeper at the gender differences between men and women in how they understand their role as a parenting partner, and what influences men and women attempt to assert on each when it comes to childrearing. Chapter 5 examines how identity performance may have a relationship to the predominant acceptance of intensive parenting, especially within the context of increasingly limited resources for more parents. Finally, Chapter 6 revisits the aims of this study and discusses the implications of findings.

### CHAPTER THREE: SOCIALIZING AGENTS

This chapter focuses on answering the question of who is socializing or teaching parents that good parenting is intensive parenting. It also discusses examples of when parents accept or reject the identity standards shared with them. Knowing who the agents of socialization are and what their effect is will partially explain why intensive parenting remains prevalent.

Before moving forward in addressing agents of socialization though, it seemed pertinent to verify that the parents in this study were indeed using intensive parenting standards as their measure for good parenting. Based on my interviews, I found that the majority of parents do hold intensive parenting ideals with which they compare their own parenting against. When it comes to evaluating the meaning of a “good parent” or the “best parent”, which served as a way of getting at the identity standard which parents held, themes emerged related to high investment of financial resources, emotion work, time – both quantity and quality, and energy. One mother of six indicated that she held nothing back from her children resulting in the feeling that “all” of herself was being utilized. In her interview she said: “What part of me do my children not have?” Multiple fathers spoke about leaving behind hobbies and personal time so they could be available for their children outside of working hours. Almost half of the parents in my interviews used the term “present” to describe good parents. Mothers and fathers indicated that being present meant more than being physically present. Instead it meant having a “mindful awareness”, being “all in”, or being “emotionally engaged”. Many parents also discussed the importance of making financial sacrifices in order to give their children the best life. They often contrasted their pre-parent life with their current life in terms of financial differences and the ability to spend more freely.

When trying to identify agents of socialization, symbolic interactionism would suggest that the parents in this study learned what it means to be a good parent through their social interactions with others. I find in this study that the identity standards of parents are influenced first by their own parents or a replacement parent figure. These meanings are shared through social interaction and then individuals accepted, rejected, or modified their own accepted definitions of good parenting based on how well their needs were met during childhood. Fifteen of 23 men were socialized into intensive parenting ideals by their parents, with 10 giving evidence for both of their parents, 2 giving evidence of their mother, and 3 giving evidence of their father socializing them. For women, 16 of 32 were socialized by their parents, with 11 giving evidence for both parents, 4 giving evidence for their mother, and 1 for their father. The second most common agent of socialization for parents in negotiating or changing their identity standards was their own spouse or partner. 14 of 23 men, and 10 of 32 women, spoke about being influenced in their ideas about parenting by their spouse. Through social interactions others attempted to socialize parents into certain ways of thinking and acting. The effectiveness of these socialization attempts varied greatly, primarily due to the level of trust between the socializer and the person learning about parenthood. The lack of trust in individuals own parents was one of the primary reasons they often looked to other replacement parent figures to develop their understanding of what parenting should look like. 6 men and 9 women identified replacement parent figures. The following examples are illustrative of these overarching trends in the data.



Nicole\* a 43-year-old full-time working mother told me that her mom was the best example of what it meant to be a good parent. Based on her mom's example she indicated that she tried to be available to her teenage son as much as possible, including staying up late to talk with him about his life. In describing her own mom, she talked about how her mom prioritized time with her even over her educational and career pursuits:

[My mom] would always sit with me at night, no matter how much schoolwork she had. She'd sit at my bed and listen to my problems...The way she raised me and the way she was there for me really helped in how I wanted to be a mom.

For Matt, a 30-year-old father of two young girls, he spoke of his dad being at every event he participated in:

My dad was always at our stuff, no matter what he was at our stuff, recitals, whatever, and I always thought, "Man, that's what I want to do." [...] Until I got to college to play sports, I never walked off the field without my dad.

When I spoke with Victoria, a 37-year-old full-time working mom of four, she indicated that she was up early with her children every morning, she participated as a volunteer parent in all her children's sporting events, she sat with her children during their homework, and then prioritized the children's interests when planning the families evening activities on nights when she didn't have to drive kids to practices. During her interview she acknowledged how her mom and her grandma influenced her parenting ideals when she said, "My mom and my grandma. I mean, I parent a lot like them, my mom never missed anything of mine and my grandma when she was around, never missed anything that she could get to. I think you learn a lot from the moms you're just raised around."

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\* All names have been changed.

Amy, a 46-year-old mother of two pre-teens was constantly volunteering and building her social network through her volunteer work. It was one of the ways that she got her kids involved in community and building their social connections, which she felt would benefit them later in life. This volunteer work was time intensive and required that she put a lot of energy into making it a positive experience for her children. In the later part of her interview she told me that volunteering was something she learned from her parents:

One thing that they did is they were always concerned about people outside our home as well. They were huge into service. They had full lives themselves outside of us. They had lots of friends. They were engaged in a lot of activities. I mean, they were fully devoted to family, but they didn't make that the only part of themselves. But honestly the biggest thing they taught me was to serve each other and to serve other people.

For parents that did not feel they could trust their own parents, they negotiated a new identity standard for themselves that included doing the opposite of what they had seen their own parents do. For 44-year-old Lillian, she learned to distrust her parents' ability to create a safe space for handling difficult emotions, or vulnerability in general. In our interview she talked about how she would cry in her room alone a lot of the time and she never wanted her kids to feel that way. As a result, she regularly tried to be in her kids' rooms to check in on them and see if they were feeling ok. She didn't want them to feel alone and sad and like no one knew or cared. Lillian also told me that her parents were often angry and yelling at each other a lot of the time. This seemed directly related to the identity standard ideal she shared during a different part of our interview, "[A 10/10 parent] is somebody that's just always home and never fights with their spouse."

50-year-old Jonny's determination to be an emotionally present parent that was "around most of the time and involved" with his teenagers was also informed by the rejection of his own

father's performance. His explanation of his relationship with his dad growing up highlighted the opposite experience of what he wanted to give his own children:

I think you can't help but think about, "How was I raised as a kid?" I do not have this story of, "Oh, my dad was the best. I just want to be like my dad." That's not who I wanted to be. [My dad] wasn't around as much. Eventually it became just on the weekends. [My parents] stayed together, but [dad] worked pretty far away so eventually he became not as present. And when he was present, it was high stress, just trying to keep a rural home going and stuff like that. A disciplinarian, emotionally absent, and physically absent for quite a bit of it.

For some parents in the study, during their childhood they were able to find other replacement parent figures to idealize and build a standard for their own parenting. This was the case for Nick, a 47-year-old father of a teenage son and daughter. In our interview he talked about how growing up his mom was always busy doing her own recreational things and how his dad was not involved in his life. His stepfather was the best parent figure he had, but his stepdad was not overly involved. Instead, Nick really looked up to and has tried to emulate his aunt and uncle in his own parenting. When Nick was a kid his aunt and uncle would take him along on all of their family activities, including "sailing, sea kayaking, camping, and biking." He told me these things strongly influenced the ideals he had for his own parenting. When describing his own ideals he said, "One of the things that I really wanted to do with my kids is engage them in outdoor activities, and I learned how to raft - I learned how to do that so I could take my family out and do that. I wanted to create a thing that we could do together that was a fun trip, something that we would have."

39-year-old mom, Tiffany, also told me in our interview about an ideal replacement parent figure she looked up to as a child. During Tiffany's childhood her father was an unkind alcoholic who couldn't hold a job, and her mother was often out of town trying to do jobs that

could bring in a little money. When her mom was home she did not engage with the kids. Looking back, Tiffany recognizes that her mom was dealing with a lot of trauma and barely surviving. Yet Tiffany felt she was the only real parent in the home and as the oldest child she took on raising her siblings and meeting their needs. Tiffany told me that as a child she would regularly wish that Susan, their next-door neighbor, was her mom. When she was with Susan, Tiffany was allowed to be a kid again. She said, “When you'd play, you wouldn't have to stop and cook. You could just play, and then Susan would come out with a plate of sandwiches, and if you ate them all, she would just make more. It was just this sense of all your needs being met. You could just really focus on the Barbie Dream House or whatever you were doing.” Now for Tiffany, allowing her kids to play and be carefree is a very important part of her own parenting.

Beyond negotiating accepted meanings regarding parenthood during their own childhood, most individuals did not significantly revise or learn new meanings related to the parent role until they were in serious partner relationships as an adult. Some initial conversations about wanting to have kids were common, but many partners did not discuss in full detail what the parent role meant to them until kids arrives. Once kids did come, discussions around parenting ideals and performances became much more common between spouses and partners. For the majority of the parents in my sample trust tended to be high in these relationships, and feedback between spouses was regular. Women tended to be the ones to start conversations around parenting topics most of the time, and I found more cases of mothers attempting to socialize fathers than vice versa. I give some examples of spouse socialization here, but the following chapter takes a deeper dive into the gendered socialization dynamics of couples.

John, a 50-year-old married father of two pre-teens told me during our interview that he looked to his wife for a lot of his ideas about parenting. He trusted her to know what the right

thing was to do when it came to their kids. His wife served as a trusted socializing agent in both her example, as well as in the feedback she would give on how she wanted him to interact with their kids. He told me he would often watch how she would do things and then try to implement them into his own approach. There were also times that his wife would bring up that she wanted him to do things differently and he would agree to do so.

Kayla, a 32-year-old married full-time working mom also told me that she was strongly influenced by her husband in her parenting ideals. Even though their child is still quite young, she told me that she and her husband continually talk about the values they want to instill in their child and the aspirations they have as parents. Through what she referred to as their “open communication style” they have found that their shared parenting ideals include teaching their kids to “have a love for the outdoors, and being adventurous and self-reliant, and also being great communicators and curious.” While Kayla talked about how conversations with her husband had directly affected her ideals, she did not share any experiences where she thought her husband was directly attempting to socialize her.

This difference between actively trying to socialize a partner and more passively influencing them was reflected throughout my sample. I found that a small number of parents were in relationships where both partners made attempts to actively socialize their spouse. These attempts were not necessarily in conflict with each other’s ideals, but in these partnerships, there was a lot of feedback back and forth on how each parent was doing, and what their spouse thought they could improve or do differently.

There was a much larger group of parents that reported that the mother more actively attempted to socialize the father into new ideas and behaviors regarding his parenting standards and performance. Most men seemed open to these attempts, even appreciative at times, and they

incorporated the ideals of their wife into their parenting practices, making the socialization attempt successful. A few men resisted their wife's attempts, but after a period of conflict would eventually defer to their wife to end the conflict. For many of these men being a good father was often inextricably tied to their identity of being a good husband.

I did not find any couples in my sample in which fathers actively attempted to socialize mothers without mothers also trying to socialize fathers. If fathers were involved in socializing mothers, then it was a two-way active socializing dynamic. I did however find there was a sizeable sample in my study in which parents did not report direct attempts to socialize each other. Instead they often rubbed off on each other through more passive ways during conversations. Most of these couples had daily or weekly habits of talking about the kids to brainstorm on how they could help them. They would also often preview or review the day or do regular calendaring with each other to figure out how they were going to manage the family responsibilities for the day or week. While parents might get and share ideas with each other during these interactions they were not based on the assumption that one spouse or partner needed to change their ideas or learn how to do something better as a parent. Further discussion of these dynamics will be outlined in Chapter 4.

Other types of socializing agents varied from parent to parent; however, there was a consistent pattern to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of each socialization attempt based on levels of trust and admiration. Many parents responded well to advice from trusted friends or mentors, which parents often self-selected based on already shared values and ideals. For a smaller sample, book authors and therapists were generally trusted, and their shared meanings were typically accepted by the parents engaged in counseling or self-help reading.

Kids did attempt to change parents' behaviors, but most of the time their attempts were ineffective given that parents often did not trust the developing child to know what was best for themselves. I also found that socialization attempts by in-laws, extended family, ex-spouses, and kids' schoolteachers were usually ineffective and ignored by the parent in the study. These attempts were ineffective because the parent did not trust or admire the socializer. After telling me about how she ignored a socialization attempt by her sister-in-law, one mom said, "I don't consider [my sister-in-law] to be a credible source." Another mom defended herself against her mother-in-law's attempt to socialize her by saying, "Hey, I'm with this kid all the time, so I kind of think I know what they need. This is how I'm doing it, so too bad." A dad talked about ignoring his sister's advice and often doing the opposite. He gave this reason for ignoring his sister: "I don't think highly of her... I have a hard time wanting to take what she said because I get frustrated with who she is... Definitely not open to her ideas and usually opposite, unless it's obviously wrong to do opposite, but I usually try plan B... I just don't respect what's she's done."

In response to critiques from a preschool teacher regarding her daughter's nutrition, one full-time working mom ignored the critiques, but resigned to a workaround strategy to appease the teacher. The teacher had sent home a note with the young daughter saying her parents needed to make better nutritional choices for their daughter because she was "dysregulated" at school. The regular food choice had been a healthier option granola bar. When the mom tried to tell the teacher that she had an advanced degree in studying food and that she thought the food choice wasn't the problem, the teacher had told her that she was the child expert and she knew what was going on better than the mom. The mom just stopped sending the granola bar to school with her daughter and had her eat the snack in the car before being dropped off. The teacher not being able to see what she thought were poor snack choices contacted the mom to let her know that her

daughter's problems had completely gone away. This further annoyed the mom and made her dislike and distrust the teacher even more.

Lastly, strangers that made attempts to socialize parents were ineffective in every case reported by the parents within my sample. When strangers made attempts to socialize parents, they did not change parents' thoughts or behavior regarding what they were already trying to do. Instead these socialization attempts just raised parents' overall anxiety. Sarah, a 42-year-old stay-at-home mom of six told me of two situations where she received negative feedback from strangers. In one situation her children had gone out into the front yard when she was taking a quick shower and a neighbor she didn't really know, called highly concerned that the children might go into the street. In this instance the mom had already told her children that they could not go into the front yard without her, but she was unable to watch them every second and had thought they would be preoccupied with a prior activity long enough for her to shower. They lived on a quiet street where cars rarely drove by, so she wasn't even really concerned about the children's safety. Ultimately, she just reminded her children that they were not allowed to go out front without her.

In another instance Sarah and her family were on an out of state vacation. They had stopped at a park to let her children run around and one of them had fallen down and scraped her knee. This particular child had a history of overdramatic reactions to the level of issue at hand and the parents were trying to train her out of it by not giving her much attention when she overreacted. The strategy the parents had previously agreed to was to quickly assess any real damage, attend to it, and then ignore the show. Apparently one man in the park believed the show and came over to chastise Sarah about how her child was seriously hurt and how she needed to give the child more attention. She had already assessed the scrape as minor given there



was no blood and, in the end, she didn't do anything else further for her child. She just felt annoyed at the random stranger.

32-year-old Jason also reported on an experience where random person in the grocery store attempted to influence his decisions as a parent. It was around Christmas time and he had been at the local Walmart buying a lot of gifts for his daughter. Because their family lived on a fairly tight budget their preschool daughter did not get new toys very often and they really wanted to get her a lot for Christmas. While they were in the store an older woman came up to them and critiqued how many presents they were buying saying that "a kid doesn't really need all that." Jason said that he and his wife were especially annoyed because this woman had no context and didn't know anything about their situation. They held their tongues trying not to react rudely, but instead they just walked away and bought everything they had been planning to buy anyway.

This chapter has reviewed research participants' descriptions of how they learned about or came to accept their current identity standards and the associated performance markers for evaluating parenthood. While each participant had a little bit different story on how they came to understand their own role, the majority of parents shared two main socializing agents in common: their own parents and their spouse or partner. As mentioned before, trust and admiration were necessary components found in socialization attempts that were effective. Alternatively, when socializing agents were disliked or distrusted their attempts to socialize parents were ineffective and unsuccessful in changing in parents' thoughts or behavior.

Common patterns did emerge for the parents in this study regarding typical socializing agents. Through both modeling and direct conversation, individuals' own parents were usually their first socializers regarding ideas about parenthood. Based on the ages of study participants,

anyone younger than 50 in my sample was born during the 70s-90s, which was the prime era for the beginning of intensive mothering (Hays 1996), as well as the increased public attention on the merits of different parenting practices (Cohen 2015). The transfer of intensive parenting standards from one generation to another helps explain part of why it is culturally prevalent. It also aligns with other findings that individuals often incorporate their family background into the way they operate as adults, including their parenting (Streib 2015).

For those that had high trust in their parents, most of what they were taught growing up was accepted as the ideal standard for parenting. For those that had lost trust in their parents, they rejected the ideas of their parents because they felt from a child's perspective their parents' identity performance was insufficient for being a good parent. For these individuals a replacement parent figure or mentor was often looked to as the new ideal.

My first overarching research question in this study asked how parents become socialized into intensive parenting. This is important to understand within a context where intensive parenting is difficult to do given the increasing strain on resources and the financial uncertainty of the future (Chetty et al. 2016; Cooper 2014). To help me identify how this was happening I had two subsequent questions which focused on who the agents of socialize were for parents and how do parents respond to the socialization attempts of these agents. This chapter answers these questions. Parents are being socialized into their intensive parenting ideals primarily by their own parents. Based on the ages of my participants their parents would have been parenting during the years that parenting publicly came under greater scrutiny, and intensive parenting was upheld as the ideal at least for mothers (Cohen 2015). Spouses also help build upon and solidify intensive parenting ideals for each other, which I discuss in more detail in the following chapter.

The main agents of socialization and the reasons for the effectiveness of their socialization was surprising. I originally thought that social comparison pressures and negative judgments directed at parents played a part in why they felt they should uphold intensive parenting. While negative judgments did not make parents feel good, parents did not change what they were doing based on random critiques or comparative pressures to keep up with what other middle-class parents were doing. In fact, parents used their agency to avoid people they knew would negatively judge them and purposely sought out social relationships or social groups they felt supported them.

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE GENDERED SOCIALIZATION OF PARENTS

This chapter focuses on answering the questions related to how gender matters for socialization into intensive parenting. Women have often been considered the primary parent and were the first to engage in intensive parenting practices (Hays 1996). Within this study I looked at how gender affected the socialization of parents. Based on my interviews both men and women are picking up intensive parenting practices from their own parents, but women continue to hold a managerial position in directing the resource investments of fathers. The examples within this chapter will illustrate how for some mothers this direction is simply a way to keep things flowing smoothly, but for other mothers their direction is an attempt to socialize their husband into making more intensive parenting efforts.

Even before parenthood women are often socialized differently than men (Wade and Ferree 2019; Wharton 2012). Girls are given dolls to play with and are expected to do detail-oriented cleaning tasks. Boys are often allowed to be more reckless in their play while girls are more quickly called out or reprimanded for not being careful. The resulting impact of this differing socialization is often explained away as a natural consequence of the child's biological sex. However, comparisons across history and societies demonstrate that many of these "naturally occurring" characteristics do not link up to biological sex in the same way for other cultures (Wade and Ferree 2019; Wharton 2012).

One of the prominent ways that women in general are socialized differently has to do with their social interactions with others (Wade and Ferree 2019; Wharton 2012). Girls learn at younger ages how to pay attention to others' emotions and redirect their own actions based on these perceptions and insights. When girls fail to do this kind of emotion work, they are more quickly socially ostracized or critiqued for not caring about how others feel. In order to be

socially acceptable, they learn to adapt to the needs of others and gain extensive practice in doing emotional labor (Wade and Ferree 2019; Wharton 2012).

Due to this training women tend to dually consider other's wants and needs alongside their own desires when making decisions (Gottman and Silver 2015). As a result, women often restrain themselves from an entirely self-centered approach to one that accommodates others before she has ever even been asked to compromise. She learns to anticipate needs and then make these mental compromises during her thinking process (Gottman and Silver 2015).

Men on the other hand are often rewarded for boldly seeking their own self-interests (Wynn and Correll 2018). Achieving their own desires is applauded. The same behaviors in women that are often viewed and labeled as selfish are alternatively seen as evidence that men are self-driven, hard-working, or proactive (Wynn and Correll 2018). Men therefore learn to incorporate others during their actual negotiations with another party (Gottman and Silver 2015). They are not practiced in considering the impact of their desired course and making mental pre-negotiation compromises before they ask for what they want. In this way, women are taught to consider others *before* trying to move ahead, while men are taught to try to move ahead while being open to considering others *during* that process (Wynn and Correll 2018; Gottman and Silver 2015). Consequently, many women give up ground before ever coming to a negotiation interaction because they want to compromise with their partner (Gottman and Silver 2015). In their mind they consider their viewpoint and their partner's viewpoint and then make a mental compromise somewhere in the middle. When they arrive at negotiations with their partner, women tend to offer up their compromised ideas while men offer up their own self-interests. Without being aware, men tend to push for a "compromise" between what they believe to be their partner's self-interests and their own self-interests (Gottman and Silver 2015). Women that hold their ground

without budging during negotiations are ironically seen as selfish and uncompromising (Wynn and Correll).

Often a second compromise for women and a first compromise for men is reached in which women come 75% of the way and men come 25% of the way (Gottman and Silver 2015). Most of the time this process happens unwittingly without the couple being aware of what has happened (Gottman and Silver 2015). In terms of parenting, these compromises often leave mothers unfairly burdened and overwhelmed with all they are trying to manage, while men feel they are making compromises to help (Wade and Ferree 2019; Wharton 2012).

In my research I found that mothers made significantly more attempts to actively socialize their husbands than fathers made to socialize their wives. 26 of 55 participants (16 which were men and 10 which were women) gave evidence of successful active socialization attempts made by wives. 9 interviewees (8 which were women and 1 man) gave evidence of unsuccessful socialization attempts made by wives. No men, and only two women reported active socialization attempts by men. In these two cases attempts were not successful.

Based on my findings I suggest that mothers' attempts to socialize fathers has little to do with mothers seeking and enjoying greater control over their partners. Instead attempts to socialize fathers were actually attempts to rebalance imbalances that mothers had previously put up with or found themselves managing. Through small continued efforts to rework what was on their own plate mothers were able to gradually establish more equal partnership in their parenting and mitigate some of the strain on their resources.

When intensive parenting first came about in the late 80s and 90s, men were not originally a part of intensive parenting; however, many men did become more "involved" fathers in the following decades (Townsend 2010). More recently there has been some question as to

whether men have caught up - whether they are really doing intensive parenting similar to mothers. One statistically representative study found that regardless of class background, both mothers and fathers supported a culture of intensive parenting (Ishizuka 2019). The importance of making heavy resource investment in children is becoming more standard across historical divides of gender and class (Ishizuka 2019).

In this study I find evidence that many fathers are indeed doing intensive parenting, or making heavy resource investments. Particularly I find that fathers are doing in-depth emotion work with their children, and that this is happening for both boys and girls. However, I also find that married women frequently serve as managers or overseers for directing the resource investments of their partners.

This was true even for 32-year-old stay-at-home dad, Jason, who invested more time engaging with his children than his wife, but still deferred to his wife's direction on how to do things. Jason invested his time and energy into doing things for his children, including making all the meals, helping with homework, doing the laundry, managing meals and grocery shopping, getting kids dressed, and carrying out educational activities. In his evaluation of himself as a parent he rated himself as an 8 out of 10 because he felt "[he] takes care of [his] kids really well." He told me he was teaching his kids to clean a lot and he was working with them on how to manage their tempers. At one point during our interview he had to stop to go get the infant up from his nap. While we continued the interview, Jason bottle fed the baby and then put him on a blanket on the ground for tummy time. Prior to the baby waking up, Jason had been very attentive to me, but after the baby was awake, Jason kept his gaze and attention centered mostly on the baby. It was apparent from our interview that Jason's role as a stay-at-home-dad was not something he took lightly. The only time he took away from his children was an hour a day to go

to the gym, and he told me he often felt guilt about leaving his wife alone with the kids because he knew she had a lot on her plate trying to move up in her career.

Despite all of Jason's investment though, he told me his wife was the one that would outline much of what needed to happen for the children, and he would then implement her ideas.

Jason told me:

Brittney sparks the conversation of "Let's talk about this," and then I agree with her. [...] Brittney's more... I think she's the one that gets things started and I'm good at keeping the routine going, like making sure [our daughter] is doing her homework or writing. And then I'm like, "Okay, well when's she going to do it? Right after school?" And then obviously that's my responsibility, because Brittney's never here. So I feel like keeping routines down, I keep those going, but she sparks ideas a little bit more.

Jason represents maybe one of the most time invested fathers in this study because of his role as a stay-at-home-dad, but he was far from being the only father that deferred to his wife on how to invest in the children. Victor, a 41-year-old father of spoke about how he made conscious decisions around his work so that he didn't have to be out of town a lot or work far from home. Although he worked as an architect to provide financially, his work decisions were made so that he could be "present" for his children as much as possible. In his own words:

When I say present, I don't necessarily just mean, "Oh, I'm just around." I think that's part of it, too. [...] I think being present, it's more than necessarily just that. You do have to be physically present. But being emotionally and spiritually present, and saying, "Oh, okay. What is going on with my kids? What do they need? What do I see? Am I willing to engage in that?" Sometimes that's mom saying, "Hey, I see this thing going on" and me saying, "Oh, okay. I'm aware of that. I'm engaging with that. I'm having conversations with my kids about whatever it is they're going through, whatever their needs are."

For Victor, he was making emotional investments in his children that he also knew required a time investment. In doing so he acknowledged his wife's role of directing him and making him aware so he could emotionally invest.



Fathers were not the only ones expressing these experiences though. For example, Shannon, a 41-year-old mother of three expressed that her husband did the work to make sure the house was completely cleaned once a week and that he took on the role of helping the children learn to do chores. Yet Shannon indicated that she was still in charge of directing her husband in his resource investments. She told me:

I'm going to be really honest. Because I'm a stay-at-home-mom, I'm in charge of parenting and I've kind of said, "You should be in charge of bedtime." And he loves that. He's not a very aggressive person anyways. He would never say, "I think this is the way it should be. The end." This is not who he is, but because I'm the one that is available, I'm the one that's taking calls from the principal, I'm the one that's making sure that things get done day-to-day, then it has sort of fallen on me to guide our parenting. Usually the conversations are me sitting him down and saying, "Okay, I've noticed this. I'd like you to do things differently in this way." And he usually says, "Oh yeah. Okay. That makes sense." [...] And he's an excellent dad. He spends so much of his free time playing with the kids and he reads to them every single night. He puts them to bed. He's in charge of bath time. Built into that is the opportunity for him to be a really good dad and he does it in his own way and so I don't tell him how to do all of those things, but the driving force is me.

Women taking on the task of management leaves them with this extra burden, but that does not always translate into her automatically taking on the heavier parenting burden or making the direct resource investment into the child herself. For example, one father told me how his wife would direct him to go have an in-depth conversation with their pre-teen daughter about the misuse of her cell phone and decide what needed to be done. The mother was aware that the phone had been misused, but she left it up to the father to try to understand and talk through the situation with the daughter and decide what or if any consequences were necessary. The father told me that this type of dynamic was not uncommon in their home.

Multiple fathers allowed their wives to actively socialize them and these fathers indicated their acceptance of her viewpoints by changing their behavior. Lance, a 43-year-old father of four children acknowledge that his wife influenced a change in his views and behaviors related

to parenting. He told me, “Sally has coached me how to be better, leave my single man worldview behind and realize... she's had convos with me about, ‘Babe, you can't do that anymore. You can't. You need to do this or that.’” Some of the things she told him he needed to leave behind when they first had children included football and drinking. He told me how he still loved those things, but that he knew they were not conducive to being the parent he needed to be. His wife had pointed out that drinking was making him “chubby” and that he couldn’t watch football and still be “present” for his children. So he left behind those hobbies when he first two kids were still little.

When talking about his time management Lance said that his wife would put things on their shared Google calendar that he needed to do for his children. If it was on his calendar then it was his responsibility to get it done. He indicated that he appreciated his wife’s efforts to help him be a better father. In this way, Sally was still the overseer of resource investments for the children, but Lance did respond to her direction by doing what she asked. Lance made sure he was investing not only his time, but his emotional energy as well. He told me:

I know what's going on and they know how apologized to each other well, they know how to articulate their feelings well. There's a handful of questions I've been asking them over and over again, just to help me know that we're all good. It's like, "Have I hurt you? Have I offended you? Are you disappointed? Are you frustrated?" I ask them those questions. I just dig in, "What happened? Okay. I'm sorry, man. I'm sorry that happened little guy." Or the next thing, “You don't know, but the reason I said this is, here's the why behind what we did as mom and dad.”

While mothers managed the larger picture, the split of how much work husbands carry out varies from couple to couple. Within my sample I found examples of each scenario, where fathers were executing less, equal, and sometimes more of the direct resource investment than mothers, even though mothers had determined what needed to be done. The deference of fathers to mothers’ management as a system that worked for the family, and trust in father’s ability to do

the same work as women, was a sign that fathers had adopted their wife's viewpoints that the system itself was valid. They accepted *her* meanings of what it meant to be a good father, or at least what it meant to be a good partner. Fathers adopt the mothers' reasons for why it is important, but they also at times are socialized by mothers on how to do specific tasks.

The teaching and demonstration of a specific skillset, along with the teaching that this skillset was important to master, was illustrated well by an example from couple Kyle and Tiffany. As with all couples in this study, I interviewed each partner separately, but found that both rejected the interpretation of parenting given to them by their own parents. 39-year-old Tiffany had parents that were not around due to addictions and significant financial strains. Kyle, also 39-years-old, had parents that were "stable", but in his own words, there was "not a lot of involvement in each other's lives, or a lot of discussion of emotion, or a lot really helping people talk through problems." Tiffany had learned to do these things as she tried to take over as a mother figure for her younger siblings. However, when Tiffany and Kyle started their relationship, he told me that his inability to do this kind of work was a point of tension in the earlier years. In our interview Kyle said:

I think particularly in the early stages of our marriage, there was a lot of tension there. I think I try to model that a little bit more now and I think my wife will probably tell you that also. I'd never been trained to talk about how I feel or what I'm going through in my internal life, and so I'm trying to not pass that along to my children. [...] I try to work harder at being a little bit more present and talk-y and chatty. I think I mirrored that, and kind of learned that a little bit from [my wife].

In our interview, Kyle indicated three different times how feedback from his wife had helped him improve his parenting because he was able to do emotional work with his children. He told me of one specific way that he recently had been doing this:

When they get into fights, they get into these things where the oldest doesn't really pay any attention to what the middle is thinking or feeling. And the middle one, he'll take it

really, really, *really* hard. Because. “Oh, this is my older brother, this is my best friend, and he hates me. I know he hates me.” When really, he's just being completely just aloof. So yeah, really trying to get them to recognize how they exist in the world. I had to make my older son realize, “Your brother doesn't see the world the way you see the world, and you need to recognize what he's thinking and talk to him. When you do these things, when you guys are playing and you get into a fight and you take it a little too far because you think you're just goofing around, he's perceiving it as that you don't love him. And I know that's not what you're meaning.” But trying to make them, and particularly make the oldest one be like, “You need to assure him that you love him and that you want him around. That's going to be an important foundation for you guys having a relationship when you get bigger.”

For Kyle it was particularly important for him to pass on these emotional skills to his boys that he had learned from his wife, as illustrated in the following quote:

My partner and I try to have a very equitable relationship. Sometimes we struggle with that, and sometimes we do better with that, but we want that to be a value that particularly our boys have - that they need to be good and responsive partners to whoever they want to partner with, and that that needs to be a shared, equitable relationship where they're actually taking care of somebody and not just feeling like ... I think like me growing up, the message was marriage is like a checkbox, right? It doesn't really matter who you marry or what the nature of the relationship is, it's something you have to do. [...] So trying to figure out ways of giving them the ability to be a little bit more in touch with their emotions, and be able to ... I want [my son] to be a better partner to somebody someday, where he's not just kind of like, “Okay. I don't care about emotions.”

Interestingly, Kyle's wife Tiffany, who I interviewed two days prior to Kyle, told me that her husband was the best example she could think of when I asked her to identify a parent that was a 10 out of 10 in their parenting. She said her husband was the best example because:

He's just super patient, always if the kids need something he's always like, "Okay, yep. Let's work on that, let's make a plan to work on that. What do you need?" Just always, always available to them and warm to them and generous to them. His time and his attention, and just his being around them is a really generous way of being. You can tell they just adore him, too.

At this point in their marriage, Tiffany seemed very pleased with Kyle's efforts to do emotional labor. During our interview she did not talk about any lack in his ability, and she rated him as a better parent than herself when I asked her to rate herself and explain some of her parenting

ideals. Over time, Kyle had been effectively socialized into seeing the value of, and into gaining the skills to perform, the emotional labor that his wife had taught him about.

Although the mothers discussed in this chapter thus far take on a more managerial or supervisory role, they are not upset about this arrangement, and their partners positively respond to their socialization on how to do things. However, the exact ratio of how couples split the unpaid work of childcare and related domestic tasks in this study was not something I had a precise measure for because I was not necessarily trying to answer questions on how parents split work. Instead the focus of this study was on how parents learn and incorporate intensive parenting ideals. Yet it was clear that there was some variation in the way couples split up this work. Some parents noted their efforts to try to be equal partners in parenting, while others had differential splits. It is important to note however that even though the time split is not verifiable, parents did report doing the same *kinds* of work – with men particularly engaging in emotion work and time intensive work, which are the kinds of work that women historically have shouldered (Coontz 2015; Hoschild and Machung 2003). Even though couples with stay-at-home-mothers indicated that the mother did more of this kind of work because she was the one with more immediate availability to do so, they also drew attention to the fact that men were still participating.

Women leaving the responsibility to the father indicates mothers' trust in fathers that they are capable of doing the same kinds of emotion work and time intensive work as women traditionally have done. Gina, a 45-year-old mom with one teenage son, remarked on how her husband usually defers to her regarding how the parenting is carried out for their son, but she also believes in her husband's ability to do the same parenting work that she does:

[My husband] will tell you, I'm definitely the more dominant parent. We are always a united front, always. So if we have something that we don't agree on, we always talk about it. And in the end, usually, he'll let me have my way in that. But we very much parent together, and my son goes to him... he probably talks with him more than he talks to me. But [my husband]'s very much able to do anything as a parent that I do... we're very much equals.

Similarly, fathers also expressed their beliefs that men are capable of doing emotion work and that fathers should prioritize spending significant time with their children. 30-year-old father, Jack, told me he used to go to work at his full-time job as a document translator at 10am before he had kids. After his first son was born, he switched his schedule to start work at 5am so he could be home by 1pm to still get in significant time with his kids during the day. His kids and wife would wake up at 8am and then when he got home at 1pm he would give his wife a break from the kids for a couple of hours and then they would spend time together as a family in the evening, often taking the kids to the park or playing in the back yard. He said, "Now that I have a kid, I want to try and get [to work] as early as I can most days, so that I can get home as early as I can so I can spend more time with my son during the day. Because once he goes to sleep for the night, my time with him for that day is over."

Furthermore, Jack demonstrated his belief that men and women were capable of doing interchangeable work when he told me:

I don't think it's necessarily gender specific, but I do think it is very important that there is a provider and a nurturer. And it's up to the parents to decide who's going to be better at each job, right? I think of myself as a pretty good nurturer. I'm a pretty caring guy and I have a lot of patience with a lot of stuff and so, I mean, we did discuss the option of me going part-time and having Andrea continue working full-time. But then I wanted her to have that opportunity to be the nurturer rather than the provider. Because to not really sugar-coat it, being the provider kind of sucks. And yes, being the nurturer also kind of sucks. It depends on the stage of life you are in. Right now, I would love nothing more than to be at home most of the day with my kid.

Jack was also being taught by his wife how to do parenting the way she wanted it done though. While Jack thought that parenting roles were interchangeable by gender, he still deferred to his wife in doing things the way she asked for them to be done. He told me he tried to “copy” what his wife did in her parenting: “She always updates me like, ‘Oh hey so I started doing this,’ and I just try and copy that to the best of my ability. I just try and match what she does, and it seems to be working really well.” I interviewed his 30-year-old wife Andrea a couple days later, and talking about the dynamic between her and her husband she told me, “We discuss everything very openly and I feel like he's really good at listening to me and incorporating my ideas.”

50-year-old-Jonny also noted his belief that even though he and his wife had more of a traditional split in the way they divided up parenting he did not believe that gender inherently required certain types of splits:

I think either one of the parents can have these qualities. In some cases, a single parent has all of the qualities. In our home and in the one I was raised in, the mother has been more emotionally supportive, probably more than what I have provided, just in terms of caring. I try to be emotionally supportive, but I'm just a little more firm than I think the mother is. Now, I don't know if there's an inherent personality in that gender or not, because I've seen some dads that are that way, as well. I just think there are roles in parents, if there's a two-partner unit, that they kind of take on different qualities and different ways to support their kids. I think there are differences, yeah, but I think how you split them up, it doesn't really matter.

Throughout my interviews, belief in *gender interchangeability* in parenting was a theme. Only three of 55 interviewees told me they thought there were gender differences that mattered for being a good parent. This was surprising to me given that prior research has found differences in the way that people view ideal motherhood versus ideal fatherhood (Townsend 2010; Hays 1996). Yet the increasing plurality in social definitions of what it means to be a good mother or a good father in recent years may be part of the reason for this shift away from gendered ideals (Bear and Pittinsky 2022; Crowley 2015; Coontz 2015).

While most men in my study had learned to do parenting the way their wife suggested it should be done, and therefore did not have active socialization attempts currently occurring because the socialization had already been effective, in other families, there was apparent tension between partners in regard to co-parenting, with mothers making more intentional attempts to socialize fathers. Robert, a 36-year-old father, spoke of how he often deferred to his wife in her parenting techniques. He told me, “She often researches how to do things and then I go with that.” Yet his efforts to take direction on when and how to make resource investments was not satisfactory to his wife. She wanted him to also take on more of the managerial aspects of to even out her burden in parenting. In the following quote Robert indicates that his wife would like him to help with food prep and think about how to make sure the child gets variety in their diet:

She thinks that I should be doing more to help and when I compare myself to other fathers, I feel like I'm very active and I'm participating a lot. And so that's a time where I feel like there's a general misunderstanding. I think that she recognizes that I'm more involved than her father or my father was in raising us. But I feel like she wants it to be more evenly split in terms of the burden and I try to do that as much as I can, but... One of the easiest examples is with the feeding stuff that we're talking about. At times she would rather that I prepared the food or that I make the decision on what our son's going to eat for breakfast or for lunch or something, or for dinner. I'm hesitant to do that because I feel like she is micromanaging it. And so it's like, "Well, he already had strawberries or he had carrots yesterday." And it's like, "Okay, well, I go in the fridge and this is what I see, and this is how I would prepare his plate. If then you're going to tell me not to do it that way, then I'm like, 'Where's my value added?'" And so, in that division labor [...] she makes the plate and I think sometimes she would rather that I make some plates. But again, because I feel like then I get questioned about it, then I tend not to want to do that.

In this example, socialization by the mother has only been partially effective. In some ways the father has rejected her interpretation of what it means to be a good parent. To him it is not necessary to worry about the nutrition the way the mother does. There is a failure not only to change behavior, but to change the belief around the behavior, or to get him to accept the meaning that to be a good father means to plan and prepare foods according to certain rules.



According to 7 of the mothers in my sample, when fathers continuously resisted their interpretations about parenting and making the resource investments that mothers saw as important, the relationship between the parents was either dissolved, or it became unfulfilling to the mother. Five of the women in my study that experienced this indicated they had left prior partners over this incongruity. Two had remarried to a partner that did defer to them, and three remained single. Two other women told me they were waiting to leave their marriages when their child was older, specifically because their husbands could not be persuaded to participate more in the resource investment plans they thought were necessary for their child. Interestingly, both of these couples had only had one child because the mother had tried to socialize the father into intensive care giving after the first child was born and both fathers had been unresponsive. Each mother had determined on their own that they would not be having any more children because that would continue to increase their burden in having to do all of the intensive parenting on their own. This finding relates directly to the current expectation that marriages today should provide a high level of emotional satisfaction, and if that satisfaction is not found then that is a reason to leave (Coontz 2004).

However, fathers deferring to mothers and accepting their meanings of what it meant to be a good father, or at least a good husband, was the norm across my interviews. Prior research finds that for many fathers, being a good father and being a good husband is a “package deal” (Townsend 2010). While fathers may not have come to certain parenting conclusions on their own, they *are* learning and accepting ideas from their wives on both the importance of and the application of intensive parenting. In these way mothers are effectively socializing fathers. Yet, it is not always clear whether father’s acceptance of shared meanings has to do with their identity as a husband or their identity as a parent, or both. For example, one father told me he thought he

was an 8 out of 10 parent because he was “supportive and involved” in his children’s lives, *and* because he was “a pretty good husband”. At the end of another father’s interview, I asked him if there was anything else he thought was relevant about his experience as a parent that might be important to share. His response was, “Always communicate with your wife. That, and then, always make sure that she feels you’re still fighting for her on a daily basis. To be a successful parent, you need to have a successful marriage between you and your spouse.”

This lack of clarity in motivations for men also mirrors the sometimes dual messaging from mothers. Mothers reported a mix between trying to teach husbands why intensive parenting was important, as well as trying to convince husbands to do more intensive parenting as a way to help balance out the pressures they faced. Women that found or had found themselves managing an undue burden of the parenting made small attempts to modify their husbands’ thinking and behavior. Giving feedback in increments broke up the burden of this task so it did not have to be fully understood or done all at once. Luckily it did result in positive results for more of the women than not. This makes sense given that men who are unable to incorporate feedback from their partners have an 81% chance of getting divorced (Gottman and Silver 2015). However, the task of coaching husbands on how to be good partners and parents still leaves an additional burden on women.

Yet, there were some indications that men did truly agree and accept certain ideas only on the merits of how they would affect their children, and not their relationship with their spouse. Men gave examples of continuing to do the same kinds of work with children when mothers were not around. Mothers also shared examples of being pleasantly surprised to catch their husbands doing things they had taught them when the father did not know she was observing. Furthermore, several men talked about the appreciation they had for their wife’s insight and

guidance on helping them to be a better father. Only on two occasions were wives listening during husband's interviews, so for most of the men there would have been no reason to express this appreciation unless it was genuine.

In contrast to the men in my study, no mothers in my sample spoke of trying to fulfill their role as a good wife in connection with what it meant for them to be good mothers. In addition, only a couple of mothers spoke about their husbands actively trying to socialize them into viewing parenting ideals of parenting practices differently. One mother told me that she easily brushed this off as her husband not even really knowing what was going on. She told me that his ideas were "not well received" and that over time he stopped trying to tell her how to do things. The other mother half-heartedly verbalized her agreement with her husband's views, but did not seem to really internalize them, as both he and she told me in their separate interviews that he was constantly reminding her and getting after her for not putting those viewpoints into practice with their children. Yet for both of these couples the marital relationship did not seem to suffer despite the woman rejecting the husband's interpretations.

This chapter has tried to answer another one of the overarching questions of this study, which asked whether the agents of socialization are different for mothers and fathers, and whether mothers serve as agents of socialization to fathers. The initial agents of socialization for both mothers and fathers were their own parents, usually identified in combination. However, women do serve as agents of socialization to their partners much more often than men. This includes socializing their partners into a workable parenting routine, in which the mother is deferred to as the expert or manager regarding how things should be carried out with the children. The managerial approach of many mothers and the deference of fathers to mothers' resource investment plans partially helps to explain the hold of intensive parenting in the broader

society. More fathers are allowing themselves to be influenced by their partners to make intensive resource investments. An effort that was originally made primarily by women has taken up traction among men. Thus, a growing portion of the societal population now upholds intensive parenting ideals and practices.

## CHAPTER FIVE: HOW IDENTITY AFFECTS SOCIALIZATION

This chapter looks more deeply at identity and how it matters for adult socialization. It seeks to outline a theory, based on findings from this study, for why those individuals with larger gaps between identity performance and identity standards may experience socialization differently. In outlining this theory, I also give an explanation for why certain cultural standards, such as intensive parenting, remain normative even when one might expect greater resistance due to the difficulty of meeting the associated identity standards.

Based on my interviews, I found that the parents within this study place a strong importance upon their identities as parents. Despite their various paths into parenthood, some planned and some unplanned, all of my participants had chosen to take on an identity as a parent and felt that it was important to do so. Their reasons for acknowledging the importance of such an identity varied. Some said they had always been excited about being parents. Others said they thought it was a worthwhile thing to do and therefore felt they should do it. Some parents said the role was important to them because it utilized their natural talents, and others said it made them feel fulfilled. For a multitude of reasons these individuals had decided it was important to them to be a parent.

Through my interviews with these parents I discovered that the importance of their identity motivated them to put significant effort into trying to be a good parent. However, I also found that many parents faced limitations when it came to their personal resources, and these limitations usually made parents feel like their efforts were falling short. When parents fell short due to limited resources, they usually blamed themselves instead of acknowledging that it was unrealistic to expect endless resources be available to them. Yet those with greater resources for enacting their identity had an easier time feeling like they were good parents. For clarification,

these resources do include financial resources, but also include things like greater time availability, higher levels of personal energy, and greater emotional resilience.

Over and over I found that resource limitations and personal efforts were the two main things that affected participants' self-perceptions of identity performance. This self-perception of identity performance also proved to be the biggest factor influencing the socialization process of parents within this study. Throughout the rest of this chapter I showcase how *identity importance*, *identity performance*, and *identity standards*, along with resource limitations work together to affect the socialization process of parents. As a review of these earlier defined terms, *identity importance* refers to how strongly an individual is determined to hold a certain identity, *identity performance* refers to how well someone is performing their identity, and *identity standards* are the comparison measures used to evaluate identity performance.

After recruiting her for my study, Lillian suggested we meet over lunch to complete our interview. I met with her mid-day at a sit-down Italian restaurant where she quickly ordered a \$20 meal without any appearance of financial concern. As we spoke her spunky personality came through several times when she would laugh at her own jokes or mock herself by pretending to be her “crabby” self that she sometimes portrayed to her kids. As a 44-year-old woman she had a confidence about her and did not seem to take herself too seriously. Lillian had three children – one in middle school, one in high school, and one that had just started college. During our interview she indicated that when she was younger her primary goals were to get an education and establish herself in a good career. She had grown up with a mom that was financially dependent on her dad. Neither of her parents had been what she considered healthy examples of marriage partners and Lillian was determined that she was not going to be in a situation where she had to rely on someone else financially. Ironically, after having her first child

she had left her job in education and been a stay at home mom ever since, completely reliant on her husband's ample upper middle-class income. Lillian was directly aware of this irony, but she did not feel the need to change her situation.

While we talked Lillian told me she did not consider herself to be someone to which parenting came naturally, nevertheless being a parent was a core part of who she was. She told me about how she had made many sacrifices in order to prioritize parenting her children, including leaving behind her career and her artistic pursuits for many years. Only recently, now that her kids were a little older, was she starting to pick up some of her personal interests again. Despite parenthood feeling unnatural to her, when I asked Lillian how she would rate herself as a parent on a scale of 1-to-10, she gave herself a 9.5/10.

Across my interviews I used this 1-to-10 rating scale to help interviewees mentally track their perceptions of certain parents, including themselves, others, and their own ideals about what the best kind of parent would look like. While I did not refer to terms like *identity performance*, or *identity standards* during interviews, these were the primary topics the scale helped to elucidate, along with follow up in-depth questions. The numbers of the scale themselves have little mathematical relevance, but they provided categorical valuations that could be ordered in some ascending or descending fashion. This gave study participants a framework for tracking and communicating their perceptions of what was better or worse when it came to parenting, as well as what was closer or further from their "ideal" or "best" parent standard. The idea to use this type of scale was based on findings that visuals help people track complex, multi-part information (Dillman et al. 2014). While I did not use an actual visual image, I believe the mental visual of a scale served the same purpose.

By far the majority of the parents in my study saw themselves as fairly good parents. The range of self-ratings spanned from 5 to 10, with an average rating of 7.41. Of the fifty-five research participants, eight rated themselves as an 8.5 or higher, thirty-eight rated themselves between a 7 and 8, five rated themselves between 6 and 6.5, and only four rated themselves as a 5. With the most common rating being between a 7 or 8, I heard multiple parents give explanations of why they considered themselves to be a good parent, followed with the phrase “but there’s always room for improvement”.

I originally thought certain demographics might impact how parents evaluated themselves, but crosstabulations indicated no discernable difference across income level, education level, class status, religion, age, marital status, or employment status regarding parents’ self-ratings. Race was not a category I could analyze for self-ratings due to the lack of racial variation in my data. When looking at gender, the average rating for the twenty-three men in my study was 7.5 and the average rating for the thirty-two women was 7.34. However, the variance in women’s ratings was greater than in men’s, with more women rating themselves extra high or extra low compared to other parents in the study.

Lillian’s score of 9.5 represented her perception of her *identity performance*, which was very close to her ideal, or what I refer to in this study as an *identity standard*. When asked why she gave herself such a high rating as a parent Lillian said, “I’ve done it without even having the desire to do it, so I feel awesome. I tried my best and made it my top priority. It didn’t come naturally to me, but I did it.” For Lillian being a good parent was about putting in the effort and trying, even when she didn’t feel like it. This was an important success for her because she struggled with mental health issues which often left her with very little energy.



Lillian was not the only parent in my study that identified *effort* and *trying* as key reasons they thought they qualified for a high rating though. These themes were present in the reasoning of eight other parents that rated themselves as an 8 or higher. One dad named Jason explained that he was an 8/10 because he felt like he tries really hard. Tiffany gave herself an 8/10 because she “[puts] a lot of time and effort and energy into trying to do a good job.” Christina said she was a 9/10 “because I put a lot of myself and my energy into my parenting.” Robert gave himself an 8/10, saying, “I’m trying to do everything that I can for my son, but it’s not always easy.” Another dad, Ryan, said he thought of himself as “above average” because “I think what is important in how good of a parent you are is based on your intentions and your effort level.” These parents saw their significant efforts as the thing that mattered most.

While others did not directly speak as candidly about “efforts” they justified higher self-ratings instead by giving examples of *how* they made significant efforts. Forty parents in my sample rated at 7 or higher gave these kinds of examples, which included directing continued focused time, attention, and energy into child-centered activities; providing financial resources not only to meet needs, but also wants; doing the emotional work to model appropriate emotional regulation; spending significant time with kids on schoolwork; spending time and energy physically playing with kids; using energy to closely monitor and manage kid’s nutrition; making time and employment decisions to continuously be around for the kid(s); and/or using emotional reserves to regularly do emotion work with the child(ren).

Having high perceptions of identity performance as a parent was not just a nice perk though. Lillian’s high self-perception of her *identity performance* affected how she moved through and interpreted her social interactions with others, including the social interactions where parenting – sometimes even her own parenting – was under discussion. In fact, Lillian’s

confidence in herself seemed to motivate her to proactively seek out more learning opportunities to improve herself. One might suppose that her high self-perception would make her feel there was less of a need to engage in further development, but on the contrary it kept her more engaged in parent related social interactions, not less. These continued efforts were actually her baseline for feeling that she was a really great parent. This is consistent with other research findings in which individuals with strong positive beliefs about their role performance abilities are more likely to further develop themselves within that role, as well as enact that part of their identity more frequently (Brenner, Serpe, and Stryker 2017).

Through our interview I found that Lillian had broad involvement in both direct relationships and group interactions in which parenting came up as a common topic of discussion. She was involved in both formal and informal mom's groups, including one that was known for its ethnic and national background diversity. She recently served on the schoolboard and had volunteered in her kids' school classrooms over the years. She weekly participated in an addiction support group where family dynamics were regularly discussed, and she was involved in a church organization where members of all ages often spoke about parenthood. Her interactions within these groups had presented her with various interpretations of what it means to be a good parent and her involvement had given her opportunity to share her internalized viewpoints and perspectives as well. Lillian also told me that she spoke daily to her God, her husband, and her mom about her kids, and she had a friend with kids similar in age that she spoke to over the phone a few times a week about parenting. Beyond these relationships Lillian also sought out and listened to multiple podcasts that featured parenting advice.

Lillian was not a big sponge though that accepted any and all of the parenting ideas she was exposed to during her social interactions. Lillian regularly listened to her mom's opinion on

how she should be parenting but chose not to implement her mom's advice. According to Lillian, her parents were overly harsh in their way of doing things, which was something she intentionally worked not to repeat. In contrast, Lillian's husband would sometimes give her feedback "in a very nice way that [she was] not aligned." This kind of feedback she would take seriously and then work to adjust her attitude and actions with her kids. The difference between these interactions was the level of *trust* that Lillian had with her husband versus her mom. While Lillian works to have a close relationship with her mom, her own difficult childhood experiences have given her reason to not trust her mom on how to parent. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this aspect of trust is a crucial component to whether socialization attempts are successful (i.e. someone accepts the interpretation of the socializing agent and acts accordingly). Lillian's case was not the only example though where coming close to an identity standard fostered an openness to socialization experiences. All of the parents that rated themselves as an 8.5 or higher reported more frequent and self-sought out social interactions related to parenting.

Although high self-perception of identity performance does affect openness to socialization, it does not necessarily mean socialization attempts will be effective. This was evidence by the fact that each of these parents reported having experiences where they rejected shared meanings during socializing attempts. Openness to socialization only means the individual is more likely to allow themselves to be exposed to the accepted meanings of others during social interaction. Whether they will accept and internalize those meanings for themselves during their interpretive process is highly dependent on the level of trust and/or admiration they have for the socializing agent.

Trust and/or admiration are also necessary factors for the effectiveness of socialization among those with lower self-perceptions as well, but lower self-perception decreases the overall

likelihood that someone will allow themselves to be exposed to social situations where others may try to persuade them to accept a meaning that is threatening. These meanings are potentially threatening because they could relate either to identity standards that the individual knows they cannot meet, or worse, they could relate directly to the individual's identity in a negative way. Decreasing potential exposure to these threatening meanings is a self-protection strategy that I refer to in this study as *avoidance strategy*. While avoidance strategy reduces the chances that someone will be made to feel bad about themselves and their parenting, it also tends to keep parents with less resources from learning about or receiving potential aid.

For example, one 38-year-old lower middle-class father in my study said he felt embarrassed that he did not make enough money to send his child to college. To avoid feeling further shame he avoided going to college information nights at his child's high school. If he had attended, he may have learned about funding options like scholarships, grants, and loans. After our interview I wondered if I should have educated him on what he might have missed.

Similarly parents that most need resources to help offset their time commitments, augment their finances, expand and support their emotional capacities, and/or improve their physical health and well-being, may be the least likely to learn about or access these resources because they feel poorly about themselves and their performance. While the middle-class of America has continued to be downwardly mobile (Acs 2011), middle-class intensive parenting norms still encourage parents to invest significant amounts of time, money, and energy into their children – time, money, and energy that seem to be less and less available, even among those considered to be middle-class (Bianchi 2011). Yet instead of seeing the limitations on personal resources as being affected primarily by larger economic or uncontrollable external factors many

parents still hold themselves accountable for not being able to provide all that they feel they should for their children.

Raymie, a 34-year-old single mom of one young daughter in my study had some similarities to Lillian. They both had personal struggles with mental health that impacted their energy levels and they both did not feel parenting was something that came naturally. However, not by her own choosing Raymie did not currently have a partner, much less one that made an ample income, with which to pool her resources. She struggled to make ends meet for her and her daughter by working two jobs, and she felt frustrated that she could not spend more time with her child. She did not own a home and finding a rental that she could afford with her salary was difficult. When I asked Raymie how she would rate herself as a parent she gave herself a 6.5/10. Her reason for her lower self-rating was because she struggles to be emotionally available for her daughter and because she didn't "pick a better father". Raymie's general lack of energy also affected her ability to be as physically active with her daughter and eat as healthy and she would like to because of limited time and energy to do so. She felt exhausted trying to entertain her daughter when she was home with her. For Raymie, the best kind of parent was someone who had a stable marriage or committed relationship in which they liked to spend time together and time as a family. They would also be financially stable as indicated by owning a house or two and being able to afford big family vacations every six months, and they would be physically active as a family.

Raymie's self-perception of her identity performance also appeared related to her openness toward potential socialization encounters; however, in this case her lower perception was related to a lesser openness. From what she indicated in her interview Raymie had fairly high levels of trust with her own parents and she was completely reliant on them for childcare,

yet later in her interview Raymie said that she did not want their feedback on how she should show up as a parent. She purposely chose to be reserved at times in what she shared with them about her desires or thinking because sometimes she already knew it would not be viewed favorably. Raymie was not involved in any social groups where parenting was regularly discussed and only on occasion did she talk to one coworker who was an old friend from high school about isolated topics, such as how to get a child to sleep in their own room. Aside from these interactions Raymie didn't have much capacity for or interest in communicating about parenting. She did not date or have any interest in dating, although in her mind the lack of a partner was something that made her deficient as a parent.

As with parents in which small gaps led to a greater openness to socialization, Raymie was not the only parent in my sample in which a larger gap between identity performance and identity standards kept the parent closed off from socialization experiences. Across interviews I found a similar pattern between parents that had lower self-perceptions and their openness to socialization. These parents did less to actively integrate themselves into relationships or groups in which self-reflection on their parenting or parenting ideals might come up.

Shannon, a 41-year-old mother in the study that rated herself as a 5, spoke about how she was not involved at her kids' school and that she didn't make efforts to interact much with other parents. Later she spoke about how she was not involved with conversations with her in-laws about parenting either. When it came to addressing the needs of her rambunctious oldest child, Shannon was at a loss of what to do, but she also did not put herself in a position to gain insight from others parents and when she read, which she did a great deal, it was not parenting related material. In our interview Shannon spoke about how she had a deep sense of shame over her

performance as a mom. It seemed this shame was directly linked to Shannon's tendency to recede from broader social life.

Another mother, 32-year-old Brittney, who rated herself as a 6.5 spoke about how she and her husband mostly "stuck to themselves" when it came to figuring out what to do when they had a concern regarding their children. During her interview said told me the only person she spoke to about her concerns was her husband, and that often she would mentally keep things to herself and try to figure out solutions by thinking the problem over and over in her mind before discussing anything with him. In contrast, when I interviewed Britney's husband, who rated himself as an 8, he spoke about how he didn't have a large social network he could rely on for sound parenting information, but he did say that he used the internet to find a lot of good resources, and he would reach out to his parents at times to get reassurance.

Parents that rated themselves as a 7.5 or higher spoke of having resources and people they would turn to when they had concerns. Again, they did not always utilize the advice given to them, but they felt comfortable enough to engage with others about the personal situations they were going through as parents. Kayla, a 32-year-old mother of one, told me that she had a mom group chat with 5 other moms who had kids of all different ages. She said she got over 200 texts a day from that group, but that she learned many insights just through watching how other moms were talking about and doing things. Jonny, a 50-year-old father, who rated himself as an 8, told me that he would regularly get together with a group of dads that all could hang out. Jonny told me of one time when he friends told him they thought he was too harsh in his discipline and he took their feedback and really mulled it over for a while. Multiple parents that rated themselves 7.5 or above spoke of having friends from their church communities, typically that had grown children, that they would ask for advice.

While the number of parents in this study that rated themselves between a 5 and 6.5 was small, and there were no parents in the study that rated themselves less than a 5, there were other indications that even I as an objective researcher could present a threat worth engaging in *avoidance strategy* over for individuals that already felt inadequate in their own identity performance. I intentionally used language during my recruiting to legitimize and validate that parents have struggles by saying I was looking to interview people regarding their experiences and struggles as parents. However, even with this kind of language I started to realize that people who think they are not good parents do not want to be in a study that asks about their parenting. This would make sense for people that clearly abuse their children and who I would legally be required to report. They would have a reason to try to hide. But I had two other indications that led me to suppose that even decent or fair parents may not want to be examined or scrutinized when they already feel they are not measuring up.

My first indication of this was with 36-year-old Jamie. I was able to recruit Jamie into my study through a mutual friend, but after agreeing Jamie contacted me to back out. Something had happened that had made her feel she was not a good mom and therefore would not be a good person to interview. After some encouragement to still participate, she eventually let me interview her and I found out that a few days before she had said gotten in an argument with one of her teenage sons who had pushed her because he was angry. She had called the police to come and be there while her family sorted it out because she didn't want her ex-husband to be able to claim there was any violence on her part. The whole police incident had left her feeling like she was not a good mom and like she should back out of the study.

When I asked Jamie to rate herself as a parent during our interview, she gave herself a 5/10, and said it was because she had initiated the divorce from her ex-husband. She felt a lot of



guilt about splitting up their family even though the ex-husband was emotionally and physically abusive towards her for years. She also felt guilty for opening herself up to the idea of “living for [her]self” every other week when she didn’t have the kids, whereas before the divorce she had “only lived for [her] kids”. Although I interviewed Jamie in her own home, she did not seem to fully relax until I told her at one point in the interview that I knew teenagers were hard and that we had experienced our own run-ins with the police. Ultimately, I think the only reason Jamie didn’t drop out was because we had a mutual good friend that had helped me to recruit her.

My second personal experience with *avoidance strategy* was when I tried to recruit a husband and wife into my study. Tyler, the 40-year-old dad of four, said he would be happy to do an interview with me if I could come to his office and interview him at his work. When we were scheduling the time for his interview, he told me he was sure his wife could also do an interview and that he would talk to her about it and get back to me. When I showed up at Tyler’s work to interview him, he told me his wife did not want to participate. He tried to laugh it off, but I could tell he was kind of embarrassed. He said he didn’t know why she was being so “weird” about it because he had agreed to do the interview and it wasn’t that big of a deal. The response she had given him was that she didn’t want someone to judge her because she regularly gave the toddler the iPad for hours and told them to leave her alone. He said she also didn’t want to be judged for the times that the teenage kids called their dad at work to let him know mom had been day drinking again and he needed to figure something out for dinner. I told Tyler that I was less interested in judging his wife than I was in learning about why she thought she would be judged negatively for those things. He said he would try to talk to her again, but when I touched based a few weeks later, he said she was still not willing to do it even after he had tried to convince her again by telling her it was fun.

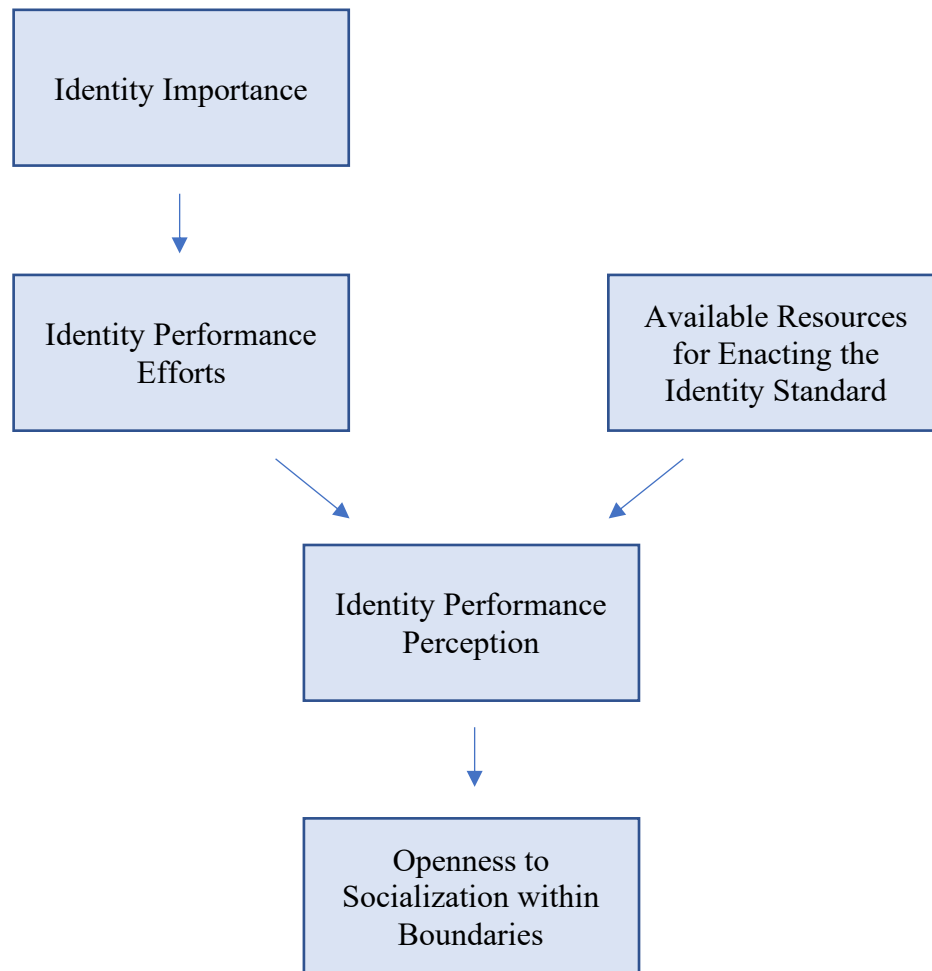
With both Jamie, and Tyler's wife, their own perception of how they were doing as parents affected their openness to meeting with someone who might make a negative assessment of them. Yet if anything my interviews with people sometimes impacted them for the better. When Britney explained her reason for rating herself as a 6.5 she told me she felt guilty about not being able to give all her time to her children like other moms. When I asked Britney to walk through her typical schedule with me and indicate the time she spent with her kids, she estimated 2 hours every morning, 5 hours every evening, and all of her time on the weekends. After she had mentally added it all up for me, I could see she was getting emotional. Respectfully I told her I could see something was pulling at her emotions and that I wondered if she would be comfortable sharing it with me.

Britney then told me that she had never stopped to add up all the time she was spending with her kids, and she was just realizing it was quite a lot - probably comparable to most non-working moms with kids in school. Britney's crying was her release of the guilt she had felt. Prior to our interview she had equated working to depriving her kids of her time. Although her kids seemed well-adjusted from what I could tell during my two visits to their home, and both parents shared positive feedback from schoolteachers and doctors during their interviews that supported this, Britney had not seen herself as a good mom because she hadn't made all of her time available to her kids. Once she acknowledged that she was spending similar hours with her children compared to the stay at home moms against which she had compared herself she felt relieved. In this case Britney did not reinterpret the *identity standard* against which she measured herself, but instead she felt relieved that she was more closely approximating it than she had previously given herself credit for. She could now see her own *identity performance* in a more positive light.

The examples in this chapter show how perceptions of identity performance impact parents' openness to socialization. The greater importance of an identity gives motivation for putting in effort to enact the identity well. I do not have variation in my sample for identity importance given that all the parents in my study indicated this was an important identity to them. It is likely that those for whom it is not important would not likely choose to participate in a study about parenting, especially one in which there was no tangible incentive for participation. However, even without variation in this variable for my own sample there is evident variation in the general population for whether the identity of parent is considered an important personal identity (Matthews and Desiardins 2017) and the resulting motivation to perform this identity would therefore vary. Based on this line of thinking I take liberty to incorporate these known differences in my concept map for the purpose of theorizing.

Identity importance thus motivates identity performance efforts. Then performance efforts, along with the resources available to help enact the identity standard, interact to impact parents' perceptions of their own identity performance. Higher perceptions of identity performance lead to higher levels of openness to socialization and lower perception of identity performance lead to lower levels of openness. This relationship between mechanisms can be seen below in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Conceptual Map: Connection Between Identity Mechanisms and Socialization



While meanings are learned through social interactions, many times they are learned before individuals have any reason to distrust or question the information being shared. In this way, baselines for shared social meaning are set down without typically being rejected outright. In attempting to answer the question of why intensive parenting ideals remain so dominant despite the growing strains on resources that parents often feel an extension of identity theory is necessary. In both identity theory and its earlier parent theory symbolic interactionism, meaning is seen as important because it motivates behavior (Stryker 2008; Blumer 1969). When interpreted meaning changes then behavior often changes (Blumer 1969). Accordingly, I find

evidence in my research that meanings associated with certain identity perceptions affect behavior in certain ways. For example, those that feel good about their identity performances are more likely to expose themselves to further socialization experiences. These experiences do not present high levels of identity threat. As a result, parents that place a high importance on their identity, but that are also able to closely approximate intensive parenting standards are not likely to try to change the culture or question their own identity meanings.

Alternatively, those that do not place a high importance on a parent identity are also not likely to question cultural standards or push for any change. If they accidentally find they are good at approximating the standards they may reconsider their own identity roles, but pursue an identity that aligns with the larger cultural ideals. Those that are not able to perform well and do not place an importance on parenting are either unlikely to have children or abandon efforts to fulfill the parent role.

Only those that place high importance on the parent role, but struggle to meet those standards have an incentive to actively try to change the culture. However, the discomfort and shame associated with feeling they have performed poorly often keeps them in avoidance strategies. These strategies keep parents shut down and isolated. While they have the most to gain by rejecting the cultural standard, they are prone to questioning themselves more than questioning the standard.

Furthermore, when and if parents that feel they are doing poorly are exposed to new identity standards it is often done quietly in a way that provides relief to let them know they aren't alone in their struggles. In this study I found examples of there were parents felt they were let in on a secret that not all parents are better than them or are without regular failures. This quietness about sharing alternative ideas also keeps them from emerging as new prominent

identity standards. This can be especially harmful to women and single parents who often already feel extra strain on their limited resources, but negatively interpret a lack of resources as a personal failure in their parenting performance. In this way certain meanings lead to certain types of common action. Types of predicted action based on identity importance and identity performance perceptions are outline below in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Theoretical Types of Action by Identity Importance and Identity Performance

	High Perception of Performance	Low Perception of Performance
High Identity Importance	Unlikely to question cultural identity standards or doubt personal identity.	Likely to doubt personal identity OR question cultural identity standards.
Low Identity Importance	Unlikely to question cultural identity standards but may shift personal identity.	Unlikely to question cultural identity standards or take on associated personal identity.

One of the reasons intensive parenting continues to be upheld as the ideal, even when resources are limited and strained, is because those that have the greatest interest in openly rejecting these expectations rarely speak up bring attention to their own struggles as parents. Although my data is limited, I observed differences in parents' willingness to be in social situations where their identity performance could be called into question. Parents with higher self-performance ratings were not afraid to be in regular contact with other parents or social groups that had an interest in parenting. Conversely, those with lower self-performance ratings seemed to avoid putting themselves in these types of social situations. Thus individuals with higher identity performance perceptions gain more insight and support while those with lower identity perceptions are left out of the parenting conversations that influence the broader culture.

In regard to Lutfey and Mortimer's (2003) call to build better theories of adult socialization, this relationship between identity performance and general openness to further socialization is important. Because adults have greater autonomy and ability to avoid situations they don't want to be in, the efforts to socialize those that are avoiding social interactions becomes more difficult. On the flip side, extending the theory from the observed cases of this study, adults with high self-perceptions of identity performance may be easier to socialize simply because they are available for more socialization attempts. This is in direct contrast to what I originally thought, which was that those with larger gaps between identity performance and identity standards would have a greater openness to socialization because of their desire to close the gap. Prior theory suggests that individuals will try to close the gap usually by improving their performance or less often by reinterpreting the identity standard (Burke 2006), but this seems to be something they do on their own terms when they are ready. If a socializing agent intends to

intervene in some way, they will need to put in more effort to draw out those that already feel vulnerable regarding their performances.



## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

A primary aim of this research has been to understand the pervasiveness and durability of intensive parenting culture despite growing strains on middle-class American's time, energy, and money (Chetty et al. 2016). Intensive parenting ideals promote making significant investments of these same resources at an ever-increasing rate to try to give children the best chance at life (Mintz 2014; Bianchi 2011; Hays 1996). Yet there is a lot of vagueness around what kinds and levels of investments can reliably lead to certain outcomes (Hsin and Felfe 2014; Mayer 2010). This leaves a lot of guesswork for parents with the best-case strategy being to invest their personal resources without caps or bounds.

The current study gives insight into why intensive parenting remains prevalent despite growing resource strain. Through examining the socialization process for parents, I find that how meaning is shared regarding parent roles plays an important part in the lack of change in cultural parenting ideals. The parents in my study primarily gained their first information about what it means to be a parent from their own parents, who would have been parenting during the 70s and 80s when intensive parenting was first broadly emphasized across media and parenting publications. While not all participants had parents that emulated intensive parenting ideals, those that did highlighted how their parents' significant investments were something they wanted to recreate for their own children. For these study participants their first ideas around parenting were formed before they ever thought about becoming parents themselves.

Those that did not have good experiences or trust in their parents while growing up typically rejected their parent's interpretation of parenting and they often worked to do the opposite of what they had experienced. In fact, trust or admiration of socializing agents was key to whether socialization attempts were effective for my sample throughout their socialization

experiences. While some participants found role models in other parent figures and tried to emulate those people instead, others used their own parents as a model of what not to do. Those that lacked trust or admiration for their parents seemed to have been more aware of their own thoughts about what a parent should be at a younger age, but most study participants really started to form more concrete ideas about parenthood once they felt ready to become parents themselves. At this point in time, partners typically became the most significant influences on how study participants thought about parenthood. Through social interactions they are being taught new perspectives from their partner, and then incorporating those perspectives long-term into their parenting.

The lack of socialization by peers was surprising, as I originally thought that parents might be intensively parenting because they felt pressure due to negative judgements about their parenting or due to comparisons between their own investments and the kinds of investments they observed other parents making. Yet this was not the case at all. In fact, parents were able to avoid those types of judgements for the most part by not spending time around or communicating with those that think differently than they do, or by shrugging off negative encounters. Parents are not engaging in intensive parenting because of outside pressures. Instead they are participating in intensive parenting because they truly believe it is the best thing for their children or their family.

I also found evidence that gender affects the socialization patterns among parents, with women making more attempts to socialize their partners. Women both made more attempts and failed more attempts than men, but the majority of women's efforts to socialize their husbands were effective. Women made efforts to socialize their husbands into seeing the importance of intensive parenting, and into performing the associated resource investments that the mother

requested. Many fathers came to accept the belief that it was important to do intensive parenting and to do it the way their wife wanted them to do it. In doing this, fathers fulfilled their roles both as husbands and as parents. Fathers effective socialization into accepting these beliefs and taking on these tasks helps to partially explain the stronghold of intensive parenting among the middle class. As intensive parenting beliefs and practices that are gender interchangeable become more and more common among men, they extend intensive parenting into part of the population that did not historically participate in or take as much interest in this type of work (Coontz 2015; Hoschild and Machung 2003).

Examination of the identity standards held by the participants in my study revealed the vast majority did measure themselves against intensive parenting ideals. For many of these parents their lack of personal experience left them with little reason to question the dominant ideologies of intensive parenting until after they had already accepted those ideals.

It was not until after having children that some individuals really started to struggle to meet the standards of intensive parenting. Those that struggled to feel good about their own identity performance did not seem to question the identity standards they tried to measure up to, but instead judged themselves negatively for not having more time, money, or energy to give to their children. While some of this related to situations like lower income or long working hours, other factors like mental health, the extent of real partnership between spouses in sharing the workload, or lack of having a partner at all, also contributed to strained resources.

Unfortunately, gaps between self-assessed identity performance and identity standards often lead to psychological distress and greater mental health challenges when gaps are prolonged (Marcussen and Gallagher 2017; Stroope, Walker, and Franzen 2017; Jaspal and Breakwell 2014). Furthermore, in my research I found that those who felt inadequate in their

identity performance were the least likely to want to openly examine their parental performance with others. As a way to reduce distress and discomfort individuals who felt poorly about their identity performance engaged in avoidance strategy. This kind of strategy shields parents from social situations where they could potentially be scrutinized. However, lack of social exposure also kept parents from potential opportunities to compare and learn new meanings related to identity standards or personal identity performance. Avoidance kept parents from further negative feelings, but it also limited their potential for a more positive identity experience as well. Generally, this meant that openness to new socialization was low for those with lower identity performance self-ratings.

This finding was also surprising, given that prior research has found that individuals with larger gaps try to close those gaps through improving performance, decreasing accepted standards, or abandoning the identity all together (Burke 2006). Due to these findings I hypothesized that individuals with larger gaps would be more open to socialization attempts or encounters because they would be motivated to find ways to close the gap. However, in my research it appears that socialization is less likely to be sought out by those with larger gaps. It may be that there is a tipping point on the spectrum between identity performance and identity standards, where those that feel a gap but at not too far feel motivation and hope to close the gap, whereas those with the largest gaps feel they are too far away to make up the distance and therefore they feel hopeless. Future research should look into whether this kind of a tipping point exists and how it might change the direction of motivations.

The implications of this are key for understanding why intensive parenting culture remains dominant among the middle class despite growing resource strain. *Those that have the most to gain from speaking up or pushing for cultural change, are also the most likely to avoid*

*bringing attention to what could potentially be seen as personal failure.* To the extent that I found evidence of individuals being able to reduce the gap between perceptions of identity performance and identity standards, it was only after exposure to new interpretations during social interactions. However, these new interpretations were usually shared either as accidental, unintended revelations or as quiet insider secrets that some benevolent, more confident parent was willing to bestow. Yet new meanings often provided relief by allowing parents to adopt more generous identity standards or reinterpret their identity performances more positively.

### **Theory on Adult Socialization**

The finding that those with the most to gain from pushing for cultural change in idealized identity standards are also the most likely to avoid bringing attention to their varying performance, has even greater theoretical implications. It helps explain why cultural hierarchies of meaning related to different role performances remain in place for other identity roles. Based on this evidence I extend previous understandings of how meaning is shared onto understandings of the process of adult socialization to outline a theory that can be applied to various adult identities. The foundation of this theory is that socialization into adult roles happens through the sharing of meanings related to identities and identity standards during social interactions. While individuals have the opportunity to accept, reject, or modify the meanings shared by others, I find that general openness to socialization is based on how people feel about their own identity performance. This openness is the first barrier to whether socialization is effective or accomplished and it involves whether individuals will allow themselves to be exposed to socializing situations. The second barriers for whether socialization is effective is based on the levels of trust or admiration for the socializing agent. When trust and admiration are high, individuals are more likely to accept the shared meanings that the socializing agent has to offer.

Based on this theory development, those with an interest in socializing individuals into certain identity standards need to give greater care to those that already feel they are not measuring up in some way. This initial care is needed just to get these individuals to feel safe showing up to learning opportunities where socialization may occur. However, this is only a first step. Efforts to inspire trust or respect are also necessary foundations for getting others to accept shared meanings. Strategies for creating trust often include lessening hierarchical differences in power by those in power making greater efforts themselves to be vulnerable at times (Brown 2013) through sharing personal setbacks, using humor, or otherwise making themselves relatable. These strategies can lessen the perceived differences between learner and socializing agent (Brown 2013). Furthermore, demonstrating openness to feedback and the need for continued personal growth as well creates a model of regular information sharing.

Instead of looking at the identity of parent, this theory can also be applied to other adult roles such as full-time employee for example, in which case we would expect that employees that perceive they are doing well in their roles would be more likely to further invest in developing their workplace identity. Hypothetically these same employees would be open to learning more about what the company leaders, supervisors, and coworker teams thought about an individual's identity performance and/or standards related to the ideal worker. Those that initially perform well based on dominant cultural standards would be more likely to confidently take on positions of power and through their power contribute to the ongoing creation of identity standards similar to the ones they were able to closely approximate.

Alternatively, those that struggle to feel they are meeting ideal standards for their identity role may be less likely to call attention to their performances. Avoidance strategies allow them to float under the radar, but they also can keep these individuals trapped from further

opportunities because that are not on anyone's radar. An example of this might be women holding back their work or ideas until they are more confident in their ability to present something that is above average, or women not actively seeking negotiating opportunities due to fears that their requests will not be taken seriously without stronger justifications compared to what others might present (Shapiro and Williams 2012). These types of fears are not based in personal ideas, but in the cultural meanings that women pick up regarding identity standards, such as cultural ideas that women with children will be less committed employees (Shapiro and Williams 2012). In the case of such barriers, greater efforts will be needed to bring discouraged individuals into new interpretations of their identity performances, as well as new interpretations of ideal identity standards.

Future research should seek to apply these theoretical developments across other adult identities to verify overarching theory on adult socialization. Other adult roles beyond full-time employee might include political leader, romantic partner, or college student. Understanding similarities across these roles would help to further answer Lutfey and Mortimer's call for strong unifying theory on adult socialization (2003). Although I did not find much evidence that personal biography alone directed the process of adult socialization, I did find that interpretations learned through social interactions with others influenced how people thought about personal biographical experiences. For example, experiences like divorce itself did not predict the process of adult socialization, but instead accepted ideas around whether divorce made you a good or bad parent affected interpretations of parental performance, which in turn affected openness to socialization and opportunities to learn and take on new meanings.

Similarly, I did not find enough evidence to make conclusions about temporality, or the ordering of life stages, for predicting how the process of adult socialization would unfold. Future

studies should continue to examine how these factors are relevant. Guided by the developing theory on the mechanism of adult socialization, larger studies using data from multiple points in time would be useful for pinpointing how the ordering of life stages and/or certain biographical experiences might impact the socialization process.



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## APPENDIX: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE FOR PARENTS

### **Background on Becoming a Parent**

1. I like to start off getting to know a little bit about your kids. Can you tell me how many you have, boys or girls, how old they are, maybe a little bit about their personalities?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your journey into parenthood? What did that look like for you?
3. Did you always want to be a parent? How did you know?
4. Before you became a parent, was there anything tried to do to prepare for that role? What and when?
5. In what ways did becoming a parent change your life?

### **Self-Image as a Parent and the Identity Standard (Use 1-10 Scale Here)**

6. If you were to rate yourself as a parent on a scale of 1 to 10 what would you rate yourself? Why did you give yourself a (rating number)?
7. What would you say a 10 parent is like?
  - a. Do you know anyone that is a 10? What are they like?
8. What about someone lower on the scale? What are they like?
9. How difficult or easy do you feel it is to be a parent?
  - a. What makes it difficult?
  - b. What makes it easier?
10. What kinds of words would you use to describe yourself as a parent?
11. Can you tell me what you think it means to be a good parent? What specific things should a parent do to try to accomplish that? Is there a difference between what it means to be a good mom versus a good dad?

### **Intensive Parenting**

12. How much time do you spend with your child(ren) on an average day?



- a. Do weekends look much different?
  - b. When you are spending time with your child what kinds of things are you doing?
- 13. Do you feel you are spending emotional energy on your child(ren)?
  - a. What does that look like for you?
  - b. How frequently is something like this happening?
- 14. What kinds of financial investment do you make in your children?
- 15. What kinds of things signify success as a parent in our society? What makes you feel successful as a parent?
- 16. What hopes do you have for your child(ren)'s future? What do you hope for them when they leave your home? Do you have any specific goals or wishes for each of your child(ren) in their adult lives?
- 17. What are your biggest concerns about your child(ren)'s future?
  - a. Is there anything you try to do to prevent 'x' concern?

### **Agents of Socialization**

- 18. Who would you say has influenced you as a parent?
- 19. Can you tell me a little bit about your social networks or social circles? What are they like?
- 20. Does parenting as a topic of conversation come up very often for you?
  - a. In what settings? With whom? How often?
- 21. Let's talk about your more formal networks. Do you meet with your child(ren)'s teachers at school?
  - a. What do those interactions look like?
  - b. What about other professionals that work with your child(ren) - doctors, developmental specialists, teachers in church?
- 22. Do you talk with your spouse or partner very often about your child(ren)?
  - a. Which one of you usually starts the conversation? Or does it depend on the situation?
  - b. What kinds of things do you discuss?

23. When you have a question or a problem concerning your child(ren) what resources, if any, do you use to try to solve it? Is there anyone you could talk to?
24. Growing up, what was your idea of a good parent?
- a. Did you have a model of what you thought made an ideal parent? Your parents? Friends parents? What were they like?
25. Do you have any other role models that set an example for you of how to parent?
- a. Who are they? How do you come to know them?
  - b. What did they do that made them a role model? What did you like about their approach? Were there things about their approach you consciously chose not to adopt? Why did you not adopt those?
26. Does your spouse or partner have a role model or resources they can go to, to get help with parenting?
27. Are you active on social media sites? What kinds of things do you see on social media regarding parenting?

### **Responses to Socialization Episodes**

28. Can you think of a time that someone voluntarily shared some really helpful parenting advice?
- a. What did they share with you?
  - b. What did you think and feel about it at the time? Afterward did you think or feel any differently? What do you think about it now?
  - c. Was there anything that you changed as a result of the advice you received?
29. Can you think of a time that someone you knew critiqued your parenting?
- a. What was your initial reaction?
  - b. What message did you feel they were trying to give you?
  - c. What did you think and feel about it at the time? Afterward did you think or feel any differently? What do you think about it now?
  - d. Did you do anything to respond to this message?
30. Are there times that you have felt judged by your spouse/partner in your parenting?
- a. Can you tell me about these?
  - b. What message did you feel your partner was giving you?

- c. What did you think and feel about it at the time? Afterward did you think or feel any differently? What do you think about it now?
  - d. Did you decide to change anything that you were doing?
- 31. What do you think your child(ren) thinks about you as a parent?
  - a. Do you get feedback from your child(ren) about how you are doing as a parent? Can you tell me about a recent example?
  - b. What did this make you think and feel at the time? Afterward did you think or feel any differently? What do you think about it now?
  - c. Did you decide to change anything that you were doing?
- 32. What do your kids expect of you as a parent?
  - a. Is this any different than the expectations you had of your parents when you were a kid? How is it different?
- 33. Has a stranger ever approached you to give you parenting feedback? What did they say or do?
  - a. What did this make you think and feel at the time? Afterward did you think or feel any differently? What do you think about it now?
  - b. As a result did you decide to change anything that you were doing?
- 34. Do you ever feel you have to defend your ideals or stances on parenting?
  - a. How often? Can you tell me about a recent example?
- 35. Is there anything else related to this interview that you feel is important to share?

## **Demographics**

What is your race?  
What is your age?  
What is your marital status?  
Do you have a religion?  
What is your occupation?  
What is your spouses' occupation?  
Do you own your own home, or do you rent?  
What is the highest level of education you have completed?  
What is your spouses' highest level of education completed?  
What would you say is your average annual household income?