What Makes a Good Parent in the Age of Intensive Parenting? The Pivotal Role of Sacrifice

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Inception

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Abstract

The current research investigates university students' perceptions of good parenting. Given the strong influence of intensive parenting ideologies—that is, prescriptive beliefs that parenting should be highly child-focused—I hypothesized that people use high sacrifice (i.e., parents who focus solely on their child's needs and put parental health, leisure, and career goals second) as a diagnostic cue of good parenting. Moreover, I sought to investigate whether the role of sacrifice is more relevant for judgments of mothers than fathers, and whether sexism influences the importance of sacrifice in parenting judgments. To test my hypotheses, participants were exposed to one of four vignettes about a parent, in which the gender of parent (male or female) and level of sacrifice (high or low) were systematically varied. Next, all participants were asked to make a series of judgments about the parent. In general, findings supported the hypothesis that sacrifice plays an important role in people's judgments of parenting "goodness." Specifically, parents who were high in sacrifice were (a) most likely to be nominated for a parent award; (b) rated higher in warmth and competence; and (c) rated lower in negative traits. Sacrifice played an important role for both mothers and fathers, and ambivalent sexism

influenced only judgments of fathers. Implications of these findings for parenting and current gender roles will be discussed.

What Makes a Good Parent in the Age of Intensive Parenting? The Pivotal Role of Sacrifice

Parenting ideologies, the collection of beliefs and attitudes centering on how best to raise children, fluctuate greatly across time and place. In Canada and the United States during the early part of the twentieth century, children were viewed primarily as economic benefits to the family (Eibach & Mock, 2011). Children worked on farms and helped with raising younger siblings. During this time, typical parenting practices involved physical punishment and stern discipline (Coleman & Ganong, 2014). Throughout the 1920s and 30s Great Depression era, the dominant parenting ideology centered on authoritarianism and on strict, often restrictive, schedules for children (Dennis, 1995). By the 1940s, at the beginning of the "baby boom," more permissive parenting ideologies were becoming increasingly popular. These ideologies focused on a more relaxed schedule, and encouraged parents to be warm and to listen to their intuition. Furthermore, the focus of parenting starting in the 1940s shifted from corporal punishment to forming secure attachments (Thronton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Dennis, 1995). By the 1960s, as women fought for equality, there was a dramatic increase in women entering the workforce, and the traditional stay-at-home mother began to disappear (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). As women took on work outside the home, it has been posited that rules in the home may have been relaxed and that children spent more time alone (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2006).

The 1970s and 80s saw increases in divorce rates, single parent families, and blended families (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2011). Despite these increases, since the 1980s there has been an increased trend towards the opinion that parents, especially mothers, be heavily involved in every aspect of the child's life (Coleman & Ganong, 2014). In fact, on average, mothers spent 25% more time directly supervising

their children in 1998 than they did in 1965. Furthermore, working mothers spent an average of 36 minutes each day teaching or playing with their children in 1965, but by 1998 that time had increased to 78 minutes. Fathers have also invested more time with their children; in 1965 fathers played with their children for 35 minutes a day, and by 1998 this had increased to 81 minutes on the same activities (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). Thus, despite an increase of mothers entering the workforce, both mothers and fathers are spending more time with their children through direct supervision of play dates and extracurricular activities—activities that would not often be supervised in the 1960s.

Today, in Canada and the United States, "good parenting" is synonymous with great parental investment, both in time and other resources. Some have termed the vast amount of time and resources expected to be bestowed upon children as "intensive parenting" (Hays, 1996; Liss, Schiffrin, Mackintosh, Miles-McLean, & Erchull, 2012; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Chae, 2015; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015). Intensive parenting is also sometimes referred to as *helicopter parenting* (Fingerman, Cheng, Wesselmann, Zarit, Furstenberg, & Birditt, 2012) because of the heavy level of parental involvement and supervision involved. In the current paper, I will empirically investigate university students' attitudes about what makes a good parent in the age of intensive parenting.

What is Intensive Parenting Ideology?

Within intensive parenting ideology, the goal of the "good parent" is to ensure that children have emotionally fulfilling childhoods (Sayer, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004) and that they are poised to succeed as adults armed with an arsenal of required (and sometimes esoteric) skills. Furthermore, a "good mother," within the intensive parenting ideology, is one who is communal, selfless, committed, and always has her family's best interests as her first priority (Gorman & Fritzche, 2002). According to Hays (1996), intensive parenting refers to "the

increasingly common belief that good mothers should first and foremost be caregivers and should invest great swaths of time, money, energy, and emotional labour in intensively raising children" (as cited in Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015, p. 352). To parent in this way, mothers and fathers must exhibit high levels of sacrifice. These parents sacrifice their self-care, alone time, social life, money, and general well-being for their children (De Coster, 2012; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Chae, 2015).

Intensive parenting ideology can be contrasted with 'good enough' parenting. 'Good enough' parenting centres on the idea that perfect parenting is not a realistic goal (Taylor, Lauder, Moy, & Corlett, 2009), and children who are raised in imperfect homes will still become productive members of society as adults (Choate & Engstrom, 2014; see Table 1). The term 'good enough' parenting is not meant to minimize or undermine child neglect; instead, it is meant to communicate that there will be instances in which parental failure is inevitable (Choate & Engstrom, 2014). It is important to note that 'good enough' parenting does not imply less effort from those parents who subscribe to this ideology. It is simply a different strategy for obtaining the same parental goal—to raise happy and successful children. In addition to independence, good enough parenting ideology focuses on the importance of the relationship between the child and parent by maintaining consistency, effectively setting healthy boundaries, loving unconditionally, and focusing on the child's needs—with equal attention paid to the parent's needs (Taylor et al., 2009).

Although both intensive and 'good enough' parenting ideologies exist within society, intensive parenting ideology tends to dominate discourse. Indeed, intensive parenting books and literature are readily available in any bookstore or parenting website. Furthermore, intensive parenting is often endorsed by celebrities in magazines and social media (Chae, 2015). Although intensive mothering ideology is most prevalent within white, upper middle class mothers, (Romagnoli & Wall, 2012) a recent, in-depth interview of 16 Black, low income mothers

showed that they were both aware of the intensive parenting ideology present in the discourse and of the day-to-day activities of white middle America, and they sought to parent in this highly intensive way (Elliot, Powell, & Brenton, 2015). In addition, a trend towards intensive parenting has been found in China and Sweden (Coleman & Ganong, 2014).

The Goal of the Current Study

Given that intensive parenting ideologies are so widely held and sacrifice plays such a large role in these ideologies, I wanted to assess how parental sacrifice affects university students' judgments about parents. Whereas most empirical parenting research has focused on factors such as how various parenting styles affect child development (Bowlby, 1978; Aunola, Stattin, & Nurmi, 2000; Spera, 2005; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2006), and the effect of children on parents' mental health and well-being (De Coster, 2012; Thomason, Flynn, Himle, & Volling, 2014; Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013), there has been much less investigation into the factors that affect people's judgments of what makes a good parent, *per se*. Empirical psychological research has mainly focused on biases surrounding breastfeeding (Smith, Hawkinson, & Paull, 2011), the role of mothering as a bonding experience among women (Hodges, Kiel, Kramer, Veach, & Villanueva, 2010), and how traditional female gender roles may act as a coping mechanism after experiencing social exclusion (Aydin, Graupmann, Fischer, Frey, & Fischer, 2011).

The dearth of empirical research is noteworthy because understanding how people make judgments about parenting gives insight into how young parents may approach parenting and how others may react to parents, especially working moms and others who are perceived as not living up to the goals of intensive parenting. It is important to note that the goal of the current research is not to lay claim to the 'right' or best way to parent, but rather to empirically investigate how university students make judgments about what constitutes a good parent and

investigate the role of sacrifice in these judgments. Specifically, in the current research, I will test how factors highly related to intensive parenting (particularly levels of high sacrifice) affect judgments of parents' competence, warmth, and parenting efficacy.

The Role of Hostile and Benevolent Sexism in Parenting Judgments

Although intensive parenting ideology, and the concomitant expectation of sacrifice, is becoming more common, it is likely that some individuals more strongly endorse intensive parenting than other individuals. Moreover, individual differences (such as attitudes towards women and social roles) might moderate judgments about which parent, that is, the mother or father, is expected to conform to intensive parenting ideology. People who hold higher sexist attitudes tend to endorse more traditional beliefs when it comes to gender roles (Christopher & Mull, 2006; Fiske & Lee, 2009); therefore, sexism may influence people's perception of the amount of sacrifice appropriate or required for mothers and fathers. For example, those who hold highly sexist attitudes will likely judge the working mother, who displays lower sacrifice, more negatively than the stay-at-home mother who shows higher sacrifice. In addition, people holding highly sexist attitudes may judge stay-at-home fathers more negatively than the fathers who work outside of the home.

Importantly, the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory is designed to capture two facets of sexism: Hostile and Benevolent. Hostile Sexism is largely defined by sexism that is both explicit and aggressive; many people would traditionally label this as misogyny. Hostile Sexism is assessed by items such as the following statement: "Most women fail to appreciate all that men do for them." In contrast, Benevolent Sexism is largely defined by viewing men and women as different and endorsing beliefs that women require protection, which is assessed by items such as the statement: "Women should be cherished and protected by men." It is theorized that both Hostile and Benevolent Sexism serve to

perpetuate traditional gender roles, such as the belief that mothers are more capable of raising children than fathers (Glick & Fiske, 1997).

The Current Study

In the current experiment, I tested how a parents' level of sacrifice affects their perceived parenting ability/expertise (e.g., competence) and other person-perception judgments (e.g., warmth and competence). To do this, I had university students read an identical vignette about a parent, but I systematically varied the level of sacrifice (i.e., high sacrifice versus low sacrifice) and the gender of the parent (i.e., mother versus father), and then I assessed perceptions of the "goodness" of the parent. I predicted that people would rate the high sacrificing mother (that is, the mom who focuses solely on her child's needs and puts her health, leisure, and career goals second; who embodies many of the qualities prescribed by intensive parenting ideology) as the "best" mom (i.e., highest on warmth and parenting efficacy), whereas people would rate the relatively low sacrificing mother (i.e., the mom who focuses on her child's *as well as her own* health, leisure, and career goals; and who embodies relatively fewer qualities prescribed by intensive parenting ideology) lower in terms of warmth and parenting efficacy. For fathers, it is more complicated. On one hand, social norms are changing (Berridge, Penn, & Ganjali, 2009), and so fathers may be held to the same standards as mothers (i.e., greater sacrifice leads to higher parenting efficacy ratings). On the other hand, I realized that the level of sacrifice would not be an important dimension for evaluating fathers because men are not judged on sacrifice as intensely as women (Van Lange, Drigotas, Rusbult, Arriaga, Witcher, & Cox, 1997). I also investigated whether sacrifice is a more important dimension for evaluating mothers' (rather than fathers') parenting ability as a function of respondents' self-reported sexism; I predicted that, compared to those who are low in sexism, those relatively higher in sexism would rate the low sacrificing mother more negatively because the low sacrificing mother does not uphold traditional gender norms.

Method

Participants

Two hundred and ninety undergraduate students (220 females and 70 males) participated by volunteering for a study investigating "how people make judgments of others based on limited information." Four participants were excluded from analyses only because they accessed the survey more than once. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 44, with 42% of the sample being 18 years old and with 95% of the sample 25 years or younger (M = 20.05).

Study Design

The study used a 2 x 2 between-subjects factorial design, with parent's gender (male versus female) and level of sacrifice (high versus low) as the independent variables. Participants were randomly assigned to, and equally distributed amongst, four conditions where they read a brief one-paragraph long vignette describing a parent. All profiles were identical except that the parent described was either father or mother, and the level of sacrifice of the parent was either high (i.e., a parent who focuses solely on his/her children's needs and puts her/his health, leisure, and career goals second) or low (i.e., a parent who focuses on his/her children's *as well as his/her own* health, leisure, and career goals).

Main Dependent Measures

After reading the vignette, all participants completed the following dependent measures.

Parenting Evaluation

Participants were asked to rate how likely they were to nominate the parent in the vignette for a parenting award. The vignette discussed nomination of a parent based on dedication, warmth, learning,

competence, and involvement. All response options ranged from 1 (*not very likely*) to 7 (*very likely*). Specifically, participants were asked, "How likely are you to nominate [the target] for the above described award?" Then they were asked whether "[the target] seems like a good parent." Finally, they were asked whether "[the target's] children are likely well behaved."] Perception of Warmth and Negative Traits

The target's perceived warmth and competence were assessed using items from the Warmth and Competence Scale (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). Characteristics assessing warmth included the following traits: kind, sincere, nurturing, and warm (α = .88). Characteristics assessing competence included the following traits: competence, intelligence, and competitiveness. Finally, negative traits assessed included: egotistical, boastful, arrogant, and aggressive (α = .85). Specifically, participants were asked to rate the parent that they read about on each of the traits mentioned above, on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all)* to 6 *(extremely).*

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI)

To assess participants' levels of sexism, participants filled out the Ambivalent Sexism Scale (ASI) (Glick & Fiske, 1996). This is a 22-item scale consisting of two 11-item sub-scales measuring Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism. Participants responded on a scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*) to statements including, "women are too easily offended" (Hostile Sexism), and "many women have a quality of purity that few men possess" (Benevolent Sexism).

Demographics

Participants responded to a demographics questionnaire in which they completed information regarding their gender, age, marital status, children (and if they had any), ethnicity, and household annual income.

Results

All data were analyzed using a univariate ANOVA with the gender of target parent (male versus female) and level of sacrifice (high versus low) entered as between-subjects fixed factors. Only the results germane to the main hypotheses are reported below.

Target Evaluation

Parenting evaluation. Participants' likelihood of nominating the parent for an award was entered as the dependent measure. Only a main effect of sacrifice emerged, $F(1, 289) = 253.61$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .47$ such that people were more likely to nominate the parent for the parenting award if they displayed a high ($M = 5.24$; $SD = 1.24$) compared to low level of parental sacrifice ($M = 2.73$; $SD = 1.44$); (see Figure 1).

Good parent. Participants' perceptions on whether the target was a good parent were entered as the dependent measure. A main effect of sacrifice emerged, $F(1, 289) = 277.08$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .49$ such that people were more likely to perceive the target was a good parent if they displayed a high ($M = 6.01$; $SD = .88$) compared to low ($M = 4.0$; $SD = 1.25$) level of sacrifice.

Behaved children. Participant's perceptions on whether the target had behaved children were entered as the dependent measure. A main effect of sacrifice emerged, $F(1, 289) = 35.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$ such that people were more likely to perceive children as better behaved if the parent displayed high ($M = 5.24$; $SD = .1.19$) compared to low level of sacrifice ($M = 4.44$; $SD = 1.10$).

Warmth and Negative Judgments

ANOVAs were run separately for the warmth, competence, and negative traits.

Warmth traits. A main effect of target gender emerged, $F(1, 285) = 4.36$, $p = .038$, $\eta^2 = .015$ such that people rated the mother higher in

warmth (*M* = 4.22; *SD* = 1.02) than the father (*M* = 4.04; *SD* = 1.0). A main effect of sacrifice also emerged, *F*(1, 285) = 226.25, *p* < .001, n2 = .453 such that people rated the high sacrificing targets higher in warmth (*M* = 4.78; *SD* = .59) than the low sacrificing targets (*M* = 3.45; *SD* = .90). No other effects emerged.

Negative traits. A main effect of sacrifice emerged, *F*(1, 284) = 56.12, *p* < .001, η² = .165 such that people rated the high sacrificing targets *lower* in negative traits (*M* = 2.42; *SD* = 1.06) than the low sacrificing targets (*M* = 3.36; *SD* = 1.06). No other effects emerged.

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory

To investigate whether perceptions of the target differed as a function of the respondents' endorsement of sexism, we ran a regression analysis (Aiken & West, 1991), entering the main factors of sacrifice, gender of parent, and ambivalent sexism scores in Step 1, all two-way interactions into Step 2, and the three-way interaction in Step 3. We ran two separate analyses, one for Hostile Sexism and one for Benevolent Sexism.

Hostile sexism and worthy of award. A three-way sacrifice × gender of parent × hostile sexism interaction emerged, β =.-18, t(283) = -2.16, p = .032, 95% CI [-1.37, -.06]. The file was split by gender of the parent. For mothers, only a main effect of sacrifice emerged, β =.70, t(142) = 11.64, p = <.001, 95% CI [2.19, 3.08]. For fathers, however, a two-way interaction between hostile sexism and sacrifice emerged, β = -.26, t(141) = -3.06, p = .003, 95% CI [-1.17, -.25]. Hostile sexism was not associated with nominating the high sacrificing (i.e. non-traditional dad) for a parenting award, β = .03, t(141) = .37, p = .713, 95% CI [-.25, .37]. However, for fathers who displayed low sacrifice (i.e. traditional dads), hostile sexism was positively associated with nominating them for a parenting award, β = .33, t(141) = 4.49, p < .001, 95% CI [.43, 1.11]. In other words, the higher people were in hostile sexism, the more likely

they were to nominate the low sacrificing (i.e. traditional dad) for a parenting award.

Hostile Sexism and Traits

Only three-way interactions between hostile sexism, sex of target, and sacrifice are discussed below. No three-way interactions emerged on the warmth traits; however, the hypothesized effect of hostile sexism emerged on negative traits.

Hostile sexism and negative traits. A main effect of sacrifice emerged, β = -.39, t(280) = -5.15, p < .001, 95% CI [-1.25, -.56], such that people rated the high sacrificing targets lower in negative traits than the low sacrificing targets when controlling for hostile sexism. A three-way sacrifice × gender of parent × hostile sexism interaction emerged, β =.23, t(280) = 2.08, p = .039, 95% CI [.029, 1.08]. For mothers, there was only a main effect of sacrifice, β = -.40, t(140) = -5.18, p < .001, 95% CI [-1.25, -.56]. For fathers, a significant sacrifice × hostile sexism interaction emerged, β = .26, t(140) = 2.33, p < .02, 95% CI [.07, .84]. People's hostile sexism scores were not associated with how negatively they rated low sacrificing fathers (i.e., traditional fathers), β = -.11, t(140) = -1.02, p = .31, 95% CI [-.43, .14]. However people's hostile sexism scores were associated with how negatively they rated high sacrificing (i.e. non-traditional) dads, β = .24, t(140) = 2.33, p < .02, 95% CI [.05, .57], such that people high in hostile sexism rated the high sacrificing (i.e. non-traditional) dad more negatively.

Benevolent Sexism and Worthy of Award

A three-way sacrifice × gender of parent × benevolent sexism interaction emerged, β = -.20, t(283) = -2.2, p = .029, 95% CI [-1.55, -.09]. The file was split by gender of the parent. For mothers, only a main effect of sacrifice emerged, β =.70, t(142) = 11.68, p = <.001, 95% CI [2.19, 3.08]. For fathers, however, a two-way interaction between benevolent sexism and sacrifice emerged, β = -.17, t(141) = -2.0, p =

.049, 95% CI [-1.0, -.001]. People's benevolent sexism scores were not associated with nominating (non-traditional) or high sacrificing fathers for a parenting award, β = .06, t(140) = .68, *p* = .498, 95% CI [-.23, .47]. However, they were responsible for nominating low sacrificing fathers (i.e., traditional fathers) for a parenting award, β = .29, t(140) = 3.43, *p* < .001, 95% CI [.26, .94].

Benevolent Sexism and Traits

Warmth traits. A main effect of sacrifice emerged, β = .63, $t(281)$ = 10.21, *p* < .001, 95% CI [1.02, 1.51], such that people rated the high sacrificing targets higher in warmth than the low sacrificing targets. A main effect of gender of target emerged, β = -.18, $t(281)$ = -2.03, *p* =.043, 95% CI [1.02, 1.51]. These main effects were qualified by three-way benevolent sexism × sacrifice × gender of target interaction, β = -.21, $t(281)$ = -2.33, *p* = .02, 95% CI [-.90, -.08]. For mothers, only a main effect of sacrifice emerges, β = .62, $t(281)$ = 9.40, *p* < .001, 95% CI [.99, .19]. For fathers, however, a two-way interaction between sacrifice and benevolent sexism emerged, β = -.21, $t(281)$ = -2.54, *p* = .012, 95% CI [-.60, -.08]. Benevolent sexism was not associated with ratings of warmth for the high sacrificing (i.e., non-traditional dad), β = .04, $t(141)$ = -.54, *p* = .59, 95% CI [-.23, .13]. However, for fathers who displayed low sacrifice (i.e., traditional dads), benevolent sexism was positively associated with warmth ratings, β = .25, $t(281)$ = 3.01, *p* < .003, 95% CI [.10, .48].

Discussion

This empirical study investigated whether a parent's level of sacrifice influences people's perception of parental 'goodness.' Consistent with my hypotheses, mothers and fathers who displayed a high level of sacrifice were more likely to be nominated for a parenting award and were rated higher in warmth and lower in negative traits. It is important to note that, of course, good parenting requires some level of sacrifice. Raising children well requires investing large amounts of emotional

energy, as well as time spent on more concrete daily tasks. What makes the current data interesting is that our vignettes did not state that the low sacrifice parents were terrible parents; rather, the low sacrifice parents were simply ones who, in addition to parenting, had active social lives, sometimes spending time and other resources (i.e. money) outside of the home.

Level of sacrifice and participants' evaluation of target. Despite the fact that the children in the low sacrifice condition were well-cared for, the results show that the parents in the high sacrifice condition were viewed relatively more positively, supporting my hypothesis that sacrifice is an important dimension used to evaluate parents. In our vignettes, the only detail that differed was the target gender and the level of sacrifice—all other details were the same. The more mothers and fathers sacrificed for their children, the more positively they were perceived. In general, people were more likely to nominate parents for a parenting award and perceive them as better parents with well-behaved children when they engaged in high sacrifice (i.e., focuses solely on his/her children's needs and puts her/his health, leisure, and career goals second) compared to low sacrifice (i.e., focuses on his/her children's as well as his/her own health, leisure, and career goals).

Gender of target and participants' evaluation. For the parenting award measure, the gender of the target was not a significant predictor. Both male and female targets were nominated (or not nominated) based on the level of sacrifice. It is possible that because our participants were undergraduates, the vast majority being under 20 (78.4%), they may hold more flexible views of gender norms surrounding childcare and view sacrifice as an important feature for both mothers and fathers.

It is interesting that despite the vignettes for the mothers and fathers being identical, the participants perceived the mothers as having more warm traits than the fathers. It seems that the widely held stereotype that mothers (or women in general) are more nurturing and warm than

fathers (or men) was at play here. Regardless of the stereotype, research shows that fathers are just as capable of showing warmth to their children (Croft, Schmader, & Block, 2015). In fact, it has been posited that gender does not matter when it comes to parenting as long as children are in a safe, loving environment that allows for secure attachment (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010). In addition, these stereotypic gender parenting roles are becoming less so over time, as fathers are spending more time with their children and women are spending more time working outside of the home (Biblarz & Stacey, 2010; Craig, Powell, & Smyth, 2014; Guendouzi, 2006).

Ambivalent Sexism Inventory. I used both the Hostile Sexism and Benevolent Sexism measures to determine whether people's levels of Hostile and Benevolent Sexism affect their judgments of parents. In general, judgments of mothers were not influenced by people's Hostile or Benevolent Sexism scores. Even when controlling for Hostile and Benevolent Sexism, mothers were nominated for the parenting award based solely on level of sacrifice. Judgments of fathers, however, were affected by people's Hostile and Benevolent Sexism. Specifically, Hostile Sexism was positively associated with (a) nominating the traditional (i.e., low sacrificing dad) for a parenting award (i.e., the higher Hostile Sexism, the more likely to nominate the traditional dad for a parenting award), and (b) negatively evaluating the non-traditional (high sacrificing) dad. Likewise, Benevolent Sexism was positively associated with nominating the low sacrificing (i.e., traditional) dad for a parenting award (i.e., the higher Benevolent Sexism, the more likely to nominate the traditional dad for a parenting award), as well as rating him more warmly.

What Makes a Good Parent? Ideology Versus Research

Experts have identified the following factors with good parenting outcomes. It is generally agreed upon that forming a secure attachment with one's child will promote a positive outcome for children (Bowlby, 1978). Ideologies about parenting provide different strategies for

achieving this secure attachment and broader child outcomes. But not all parenting ideologies are equal in their outcomes for children. Those who follow the intensive parenting ideology feel that in order to be a "good mother," one must readily sacrifice their own needs in order to best provide for the children. Parents are likely to care for their children in this way because they believe it provides the best environment for the children to flourish. Indeed, my data demonstrate that university students have subscribed to this kind of thinking. Despite these beliefs and ideologies, there is mixed support for the idea that intensive parenting and high levels of sacrifice are required or beneficial for raising happy and productive members of society (Schiffrin, Godfrey, Liss, & Erchull, 2015).

There is growing literature on the potentially harmful effects of intensive parenting on both mothers and children. For example, new mothers completed a recent survey about what an ideal mother should look like. The findings suggest that mothers who hold rigid beliefs that represent intensive parenting (e.g. mothers should feel guilty if they leave their child with someone else in order to do something for themselves) were more likely to experience postpartum depression (Thomason, Flynn, Himle, & Volling, 2014). Another study suggests that the intensive parenting ideology can put increased pressure on working mothers, causing unnecessary stress and less positive parenting choices. The intensive parenting ideology is so demanding on a mother that it can cause the over-worked mother to become distressed. Maternal distress can lead to lower levels of supervision, poor attachment, and the use of power-assertive discipline, which can impact juvenile delinquency (De Coster, 2012). In addition, an observational study in which women's workplace conversations were recorded showed that personal conversations overwhelmingly centred on the stress of balancing work and motherhood, with a major theme surrounding lack of time (Guendouzi, 2006). Furthermore, one recent experimental study using an intensive parenting measure found that those mothers who thought their lives should revolve around their children felt they had no

individual freedom and had lower life satisfaction (Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013).

Intensive parenting ideology has spilled over to fathering as well. Fathers not only spend more time with their children than their counterparts did fifty years ago, but they are also taking more paternity leave when a child is born. There has been a 25% increase in stay-at-home fathers in the last ten years (Doucet & Merla, 2007). Unfortunately, the bulk of research discussing intensive parenting and its consequences focuses on mothers (Gorman & Fritzche, 2002; Collett, 2005; De Coster, 2012; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012; Barkin & Wisner, 2013; Rizzo, Schiffrin, & Liss, 2013; Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015), and not fathers.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Despite the strengths of the current study, including random assignment and the experimental design, it is important to note the limitations. First, the participants used in this study were undergraduates, the majority of which were under 21 and did not have children. Therefore, the findings in the current study may not be generalizable to the broader population. In the future, research could focus on obtaining more diverse participants that would be representative of the broader population. For example, participants who are older, or who have children may have answered the measures differently. In addition, it would be interesting to assess the differences in ideology based on age and whether the participant was a parent or not. Moreover, it would be interesting to investigate whether mothers are held to higher standard, requiring them to provide greater sacrifice than fathers on less explicit and more implicit measures of parental goodness.

Finally, the current research investigates how others judge parents based on their level of sacrifice. This is just one piece of what intensive

parenting ideology involves; therefore, future research could explore other aspects of intensive parenting (i.e., parental blame for the child's shortcomings and the belief that mothers are more 'naturally suited' caregivers). Researching these and other aspects could provide a more holistic picture of the intensive parenting ideology.

Conclusions

This study suggests that even younger individuals, who are not parents, have been influenced by the intensive parenting ideology. Despite there being more than adequate sacrifice across all conditions, parents displaying the highest sacrifice were considered relatively superior parents. These results suggest that sacrifice is an important factor people use when making judgments about parental 'goodness.'

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Appendix A

Table 1.
Comparison of "Good Enough" and "Intensive" parenting ideologies

| "**Good Enough/Free Range**" Parent	"**Intensive/Helicopter**" Parent
perfectionism is not the focus; parents are allowed to fail	perfectionism is the focus; pressure not to fail, especially moms
physical care: reasonable housing, clothing, and food	physical care: brand name clothing, organic and healthy food
safe community: parent reasonably manages risk to prevent harm	there is no such thing as a safe community, constant supervision
nurturing: emotionally and physically available at the basic level	emotional and physical extremes, including a focus on education and cognitive development
focus on resiliency and independence	overprotection and a focus on doing for the child
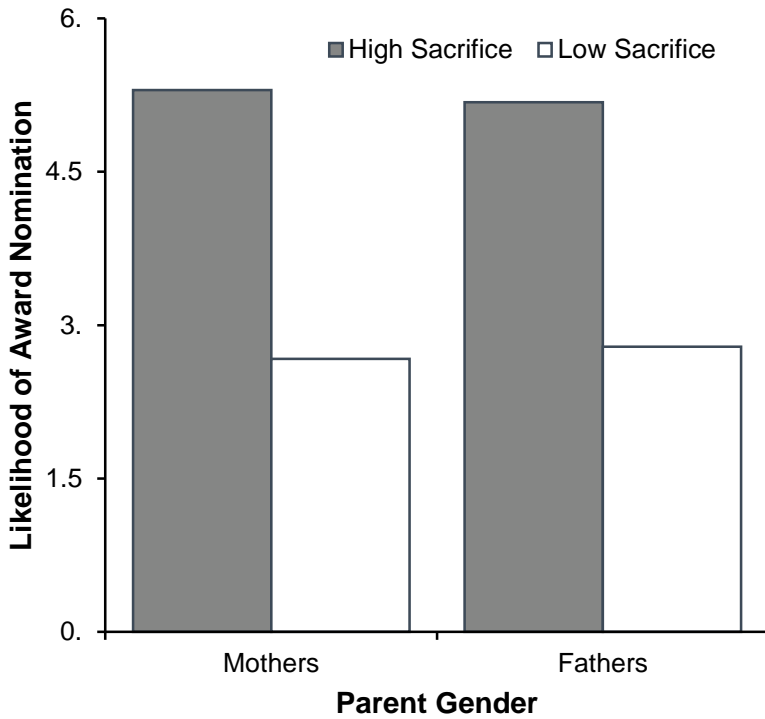
Figure 1. Participants' overall likeliness of nominating target for parenting award. Scale ranges from 1 (*not very likely*) to 7 (*very likely*).