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research article

Longing for interdependence, aspiring to independence: a qualitative study on parenting in Germany

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This article presents interpretative analysis of 25 qualitative interviews with parents of preschool children in Germany, which focused on starting daycare and centred on topics of closeness and distance in the parent–child relationships. The article draws on sociological studies on intensive parenting, and cultural psychological theories of parenting. The analysis reveals that parents discuss starting daycare within the cultural framework of intensive parenting: they stress the benefits for their child's social and cognitive development. As cultural psychological theories suggest, parents in Germany emphasise autonomy and independence, while also arguing that young children need interdependence. In addition, parents articulate a longing for interdependence themselves: they yearn for closeness with their children, but are also aware that their children are on a path towards autonomy. The article theoretically elaborates on these ambivalences and suggests that adding the dimension of parents' longing enriches both the concept of intensive parenting and cultural psychological accounts.

Key words intensive parenting • independence/interdependence • Germany • qualitative interviews

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Introduction

The topic of this article is how German parents talk about and reflect on independence and interdependence in parent–child relationships when it comes to starting daycare. It chooses an interdisciplinary approach, and uses the sociological concept of 'intensive parenting' and the cultural psychological conceptual dichotomy of independence/interdependence as frameworks. Independence and interdependence can be defined as 'patterns of family-related value orientations' (Mayer et al, 2012: 64) that set the

boundaries for what is considered a healthy amount of intimacy and distance in the parent–child relationship. This introduction sketches the concepts of intensive parenting and interdependence/independence and derives research questions for this study. Furthermore, it outlines how this study contributes to both fields of research by introducing the concept of ‘longing for interdependence’.

Intensive parenting

Contemporary parenting culture in many countries has been characterised as intensive (Hays, 1996; Wall, 2010; 2018; Faircloth, 2014; Sparrman et al, 2016; Miller, 2017; Smyth and Craig, 2017). Hays coined the term ‘intensive mothering’ in the 1990s based on interviews with mothers in the US, whom she described as strongly focused on children and their development; these women felt obliged ‘to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising their children’ (Hays, 1996: x). Intensive mothering targets different aspect of children’s development. While intelligence and cognitive abilities are certainly key goals, mothers also seek to instil social skills and promote emotional wellbeing. Hays describes how such intensive mothers expect a deep emotional commitment. ‘In sum, the methods of appropriate child rearing are construed as child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labour-intensive, and financially expensive’ (Hays, 1996: 8). Such ideals of good mothering are often taken from child-rearing manuals and other forms of popularised psychological or neuroscientific knowledge (Wall, 2010; Macvarish, 2016).

Questions of independence and interdependence are one arena in which intensive parenting unfolds. Parents try to find the right balance between closeness to and distance from their children. At the same time, there are competing ideas about closeness and distance. One example is ‘attachment parenting’, which has been described as an example of intensive parenting (Faircloth, 2013; Simonardóttir, 2016; Sieben and Yıldırım, 2020). Whereas attachment parents emphasise bodily and emotional closeness, others criticise this parenting style as being overly protective and a hindrance to the development of independence.

In the overarching cultural framework of intensive parenting, parents have different perspectives on starting daycare. Attachment parents, for example, typically consider starting daycare to be a risky moment for attachment that should therefore not happen too early (Faircloth, 2013). Other parents argue that daycare and preschool – if carefully selected – stimulate cognitive and social learning (Wall, 2010).

The study presented in this article investigates how German parents frame starting daycare. In Germany, the concept of intensive parenting has, to my knowledge, only rarely been used in sociological studies. Nonetheless, analyses of parenting culture come to similar conclusions. For example, Merkle and Wippermann (2008) describe in detail and for different social milieus in Germany that parents feel ‘under pressure’ to promote their children’s development. Therefore, this article hypothesises that parenting culture in Germany is as intensive as it is in countries such as the UK or the US, but that the situation of starting daycare is culturally specific. The research was conducted between 2015 and 2018 – a period in which an expansion of professional daycare took place in Germany: more precisely, in the western states of Germany in which the interviews were conducted. In the 1980s and 1990s, only 3 per cent of children under the age of three in West Germany were enrolled in daycare. By 2006,

this number has increased (in the western states of Germany) to 7.8 per cent, and, by 2017, to 28.8 per cent (BMBFSFJ, 2017).

This shift towards professional daycare is reflected in the age at which children are enrolled in daycare: whereas in the past the ideal age was considered to be three years old, approximately one third of all children today are enrolled before their third birthday (BMBFSFJ, 2017). This shift of daycare to the earlier years has been accompanied with competing discourses. On the one hand, it is framed as an expansion of educational opportunities and a means for reaching gender equality in the labour market. On the other hand, the so-called *Rabenmütter*¹ discourse (Karl, 2015) is still very present, in which critics portray the use of daycare as a selfish decision that is beneficial to mothers (and their careers) but potentially harmful for children. It thus ultimately results in mothers' (but not fathers') feelings of guilt. This article asks whether and how German parents integrate the transition of starting daycare into the framework of intensive parenting and whether mothers, in particular, are still haunted by the negative image of the *Rabenmütter*.

Hays (1996) only interviewed mothers and used the term intensive *mothering*. Later studies have characterised parenting for mothers and fathers as 'intensive' – but have also described gender differences in the way this intensification is experienced (Wall, 2010; Faircloth, 2014; Miller, 2017). While this article, too, uses the term 'intensive parenting', this is not meant to imply that mothers and fathers are parenting in the same way. However, a detailed analysis of gender and intensive parenting in Germany is beyond the scope of this article. The same applies to social class: it has been shown that intensive parenting is one way in which parents place themselves in a particular milieu, or aspire for upward social mobility (Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011; Vincent and Maxwell, 2016). Although these dynamics of class and gender (and their potential intersections) are very relevant to the sociology of parenting, this article can only hint at those parts of the empirical material that might allow a more detailed analysis of this kind.

Cultural psychology and the conceptual dichotomy of independence/interdependence

The distinction between values of independence and values of interdependence features quite prominently in cultural psychological works on parenting and has initiated several cross-cultural studies (that is, Keller et al, 2003; Mayer et al, 2012). This article relies on Greenfield's (2009) theory of social change and human development as one exemplary work. Her theory links different socioeconomic environments with changing cultural values, learning environments and human development. In particular, it focuses on large-scale changes from *Gemeinschaft*-type economies to *Gesellschaft*-type economies (with reference to Tönnies' sociological distinction) or vice versa. Both terms – *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* – are used as prototypes, the former to characterise rural, relatively homogeneous, small communities with little division of labour and minimal technology, and the latter to refer to urban, highly specialised, heterogeneous societies dependent on technology. Greenfield argues that these environments necessitate different cultural values: *Gemeinschaft*-based economies foster and benefit from collectivism or interdependence, while *Gesellschaft*-based economies are associated with individualism or independence.

In terms of parenting, Greenfield describes that parents adapt to their surrounding economic and cultural conditions. Parental beliefs or parental ethnotheories (Keller et al, 2005) play a central role in creating learning environments that in turn put children on different developmental paths. Greenfield's various empirical and comparative studies show that parents in a *Gemeinschaft* stress the importance of sharing, taking care of others, family obligations and child obedience. In contrast, parents in a *Gesellschaft* emphasise individual choices and respect for others' property, along with fostering self-esteem, independence, self-reliance, abstract cognitive skills and creativity. Furthermore, Greenfield (2009) argues that with these societal changes comes a stronger focus on the individual child and an increasingly pedagogical perspective. These empirically based descriptions of parenting in a *Gesellschaft* (in particular, being focused pedagogically on the individual child) fit well into the analyses of intensive parenting mentioned above.

As a Western country that highly values education and personal achievement, Germany can be expected to give rise to a parenting culture of independence along the lines described by Greenfield. For cultural psychologist Keller who conducted several cross-cultural studies on parenting (comparing German parents with parents in Greece, and in Cameroon), German urban middle-class families are a prime example of a parenting culture that fosters 'early independence and autonomy, uniqueness and achievement, self-esteem, and assertiveness' (Keller et al, 2003: 679). This article asks how these cultural values shape the parents' perception of daycare, given that starting daycare necessitates that parents be separated from their child.

Research perspective

This article uses the concept of intensive parenting and Greenfield's theory but also critically engages with them. Greenfield herself argues that societal development is not as linear as her theory suggests at first sight: societies can also move towards a *Gemeinschaft* rather than in the direction of *Gesellschaft* (Greenfield, 2009). Heterogenous societies also include communities with varied value orientations. Nonetheless, in the case of Germany, the theory predicts a rather clear picture: parents are expected to strive towards their child's independence. Empirically, this article shows that parents in Germany do indeed emphasise independence, but that, at the same time, they long for interdependence with their child and argue that their children need this interdependence, too. On the basis of these empirical findings, this article discusses that parenting in modern *Gesellschaft*-type economies is not free from a sense of interdependence or collectivism. Parents actively, and self-reflectively, deal with the differences between independence and interdependence. These theoretical arguments, including an introduction of the concept 'longing for interdependence', will be developed in the discussion.

To sum up, this article poses two sets of research questions:

1. How do German parents frame starting daycare in a culture of intensive parenting? Is the expansion of professional daycare and the comparatively early enrolment (compared to the past situation in Germany) seen to harm the development of children?
2. How do parents negotiate distance and closeness, autonomy and dependency in the context of starting daycare?

Method

For this study, two different middle-class milieus were chosen (corresponding roughly to the distinction between higher and lower middle class): first, interviewees with professions that require academic training ($N=15$) – for example, that of a language teacher or medical doctor; and second, interviewees with professions that require vocational training ($N=12$) – for example, office clerk or nurse. Furthermore, only interviewees with a least one pre-school child were recruited. Seventeen interviewees had one child, six interviewees had two children, two interviewees had four children. On average, children of the parents in my sample were enrolled at daycare at the age of 20 months. In total, 27 interviewees with a mean age of 33.6 years took part.

Because this study is not analysing gender differences, gender was not used as a selection criterion and all parents who were interested were allowed to participate. As a result, 20 mothers and seven fathers took part in the study, which suggests that women still feel more entitled to speak in an interview on parenting (Miller, 2017) but that a smaller number of men are also feeling addressed as fathers. Sixteen interviewees came from a migrant background, although I did not actively recruit migrant or non-migrant parents. In the cities in which I conducted the interviews about 30 per cent of the population come from a migrant background (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2020). Migrant background means that either the interviewees themselves or their parents had migrated to Germany.² All interviewees have been living in Germany for more than ten years and spoke fluent German. Furthermore, all interviewees lived in the western state of Germany, North Rhine-Westphalia.

Most parents ($N=21$) were recruited via daycare institutions and a municipal centre for parents. A notice on the wall informed about the study (titled as a ‘study on the experiences of parents’) and announced that 40€ would be paid as compensation. In the municipal centre, I was also allowed to present my research project in a parenting class. Furthermore, in a snowball procedure, some interviewees recommended other parents (two parents in total). Three interviewees were contacted via a colleague. In total, 27 interviewees were recruited.

Methods for data collection and data analysis were chosen assuming that talking about parenting is both intensively knowledge-based (similar to what Keller et al, 2005, call ‘parental ethnotheories’) but also deeply affective and strongly influenced by parents’ own wishes, experiences and desires. I have chosen the problem-centred interview (Witzel and Reiter, 2012) as interview technique. This method encourages interviewees’ reflections on a topic and integrates narrative elements, thereby taking into account that in everyday life reflections are often intertwined with narratives and deeply embedded in personal experiences.

The problem-centred interview starts with asking for a particular narrative and continues with a set of questions. In this study, parents were asked when they had placed their child in someone else’s care for the first time (for example, grandparents, nurse, daycare) and what this was like, at the beginning of the interview. Their experiences with different care arrangements up until the point of the interview were explored and their ideals of good childcare discussed (also in comparison to other families). Furthermore, parents’ experiences of different caregivers in their own childhoods were addressed, and they were asked to compare their relationships with their own children with the parent–child relationship they had experienced as children. More generally, interviewees were asked to characterise themselves as a parent, to list parenting goals,

and to compare their ideals of parenting with the real experience of being a parent. Each interview was approximately one hour long.

Two interviews were spontaneously conducted as couple interviews in which both parents took part. In both cases, I ensured that both parents always answered all the questions. Although communication can be different in a couple interview, in my study, I did not see any discrepancies in what the parents talked about. Because the couple's relationship was not addressed by my questions, and because I did get the sense that parents expressed themselves openly, I decided to include these interviews in the study.

All interviewees gave their written consent for taking part in the interview study (including being audiotaped). The interview study had been given full ethical approval by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Psychologie. None of the interviewees was known to me in advance and no interview resulted in further contact. All interviews were conducted by myself, mainly at the interviewees' homes, and a few interviews took place at my university office.

Interviews were transcribed referring to the guideline 'talk in qualitative research' (Bohnsack et al, 2010) and anonymised. Because the interviews were conducted in German, the passages cited have been translated for publication. The German originals are provided as supplemental material.³

For the interpretation, the German transcripts were used. A thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted. The interpretative approach is based on the documentary method (Bohnsack et al, 2010). The foundations of this sociological interpretative method can be found in Garfinkel's ethnomethodological 'documentary method' and in Mannheim's distinction between communicative and conjunctive knowledge (Przyborski and Wohlrab-Saar, 2008). The method consists of two steps: first, the content of what has been said is paraphrased in the words of the interpreter (formulating interpretation); second, the underlying meaning of what has been said is reconstructed. In this second process, interpreters look for basic assumptions and messages taken for granted that ground the actual statement (reflective interpretation). This way, 'the documentary method aims at reconstructing the implicit knowledge that underlies everyday practice' (Bohnsack et al, 2010: 20). This underlying 'pattern of meaning' (Bohnsack et al, 2010: 107) is called a framework of orientation. These frameworks are then used to compare cases – either to find the same framework in other interviews (often slightly varied), or to find a different type of orientation. In the results section, the four most frequently used frameworks of orientation are presented.

One third of the material has been interpreted in an interpretation group. At the time of conducting this study, I was a mother of three children between the ages of 1 and 9, myself. All my children were enrolled at daycare at the age of approximately 12 months. I was therefore in a similar parenting situation to the interviewees. Conversely, among the interpretation group of doctoral students at our department, nobody was a parent at that time. A single case study lays out these different perspectives in detail and reflects on how being a parent influences interpreting interviews with parents (Sieben et al, 2018).

Results

Parental responsibility for children's cognitive and social development

Stimulating the cognitive and social development of children is a key issue for all the parents interviewed. One father concisely formulated this goal: "Well, the main thing

is that we want to invest very, very much time in his development” (f-m-a-1⁴). Like the mothers in Walls’s study (2010), the right kind and amount of input for the child is seen to be key. The decision to enrol a child in daycare is mainly discussed in this regard: that the home environment is perceived to be too boring and insufficiently stimulating, as exemplified by the following quote:

‘At some point I had the feeling for both children that, uh, it wasn’t enough for them to be home with us, and, uh, that they needed more input. Especially in the case of my oldest daughter, probably because she was the oldest, [I felt] that it wasn’t enough for her to just be around me, and these constant stupid walks into town and the playgrounds, where the same people are always hanging around. And that was somehow just dull, and then I happily gave her up, and that was good for her, and she profited from it, as well.’ (m-nm-a-2)

The daycare environment, on the contrary, is portrayed as benefiting children. This is sometimes attributed to the professionally trained staff and sometimes to the material environment (appropriate toys, and so on). In addition to these stimulating effects on cognitive development, parents stress the opportunity to develop social skills. Parents ascribe to themselves the diagnostic competence to ‘see’ their children’s need for new cognitive and social input, and they perceive themselves as following the lead of their children. Several parents argued that their children had clearly signalled that they were becoming interested in their peers and that this was the best moment for enrolment at daycare. The child is pictured as being ‘wise’ in the way it develops, and parents are pictured as their responsive assistants.

The two groups of parents interviewed – academics and parents with vocational training – were equally committed to the ideal of intensive parenting but differed in their confidence in their parenting skills. Academics were pleased, by and large, with the development of their children and took this as evidence of their having parented ‘well enough’. Parents with vocational training articulated far greater concerns about doing something right or wrong – both in regard to parenting in general and with starting daycare in particular. This statement is one example: “Questions like when to introduce solid food and such always totally stressed me out” (m-m-v-1). To sum up, these results strongly confirm for the German context what has been described in detail as ‘intensive parenting’ in other cultures.

Children need experiences of emotional closeness for their development

Although the intensified focus on children’s development fits into the parenting culture of Gesellschaft-type economies, these parents also stress the importance of emotional closeness and social embeddedness. They assume that children found these environments more easily in the past, in large families or villages. Parents in Germany frequently cite the proverb ‘It takes a village to raise a child’ – and with this, they refer more or less explicitly either to the cultural past (a time before urbanisation) or to the cultural other (parents in Africa). Parents, however, also reframe the contemporary environment so that it mirrors this idea of a traditional environment. Parents argue that daycare, characterised as it is by close emotional ties to several adults and peers in a protected environment, closely resembles traditional extended families. Here is an example:

‘it’s an illusion; this, this, this idea that a child used to be home all the time isn’t really true; they had the whole village, yeah, which we don’t have any more. The village is replaced by daycare, mhm, yeah, in that respect this [form of] raising children is more traditional in my eyes than this [other form], well, than this just being at home.’ (m-m-a-1)

Parents also stress the ideal parent–child relationship as being close and loving, as in the following example:

‘but we do feel that, in the first three years, a sense of emotional security, love, and kindness are more important than a sort of rigid education aimed to maximise a child’s potential and teach languages somehow, or maths, or whatever. I believe that will come [in due time], that worked wonderfully for generations of humankind.’ (m-nm-a-2)

Here again, this father links his focus on love and emotional security to the history of humankind, in which parent–child relationships supposedly worked well. Love and emotional security are simultaneously expected to be ‘authentic’ *and* described as being ‘functional’:

‘at some point, one just has to understand what is important to kids, and then it’s really quite simple, because I know that it’s love, and love is the only thing that really works and truly isn’t somehow faked and all lovey, dovey, but rather that has to truly come from the heart, and then it works, too.’ (f-nm-v-4)

The same father also stresses that attachment is a temporary goal of parenting, later replaced by the need to ‘let go’:

‘the emotional attachment, one feels it, yeah one experiences it, pffff, in the in first three years or so. So in the phase when you don’t communicate so much with language but with the heart [...] And you can mess up a lot of things, can lose a lot of trust, you have to find a balance, and I think it works best in the early years, it just happens that way, and that’s, that’s the thing you have to let go of later.’ (f-nm-v-4)

This quote makes a strong argument for ‘communicating with the heart’ but also for balancing closeness and distance. Ultimately, parents have to let go of this ‘thing’. This neatly introduces the next framework of orientation.

Children have a right to autonomy

When asked about their parenting goals, most parents named self-confidence and autonomy as key goals. Here, several examples are quoted:

‘that they explore the world, that they don’t necessarily stay here but go out [and explore]; that’s what I want.’ (m-nm-a-2)

‘that he feels so strong that he somehow (.) yeah that he knows (.) yeah, perhaps what he what his path is (.) yeah, that he that he has the courage maybe, and the confidence that he can then (.) well, then go more or less confidently through life.’ (m-m-a-1)

‘I would say, I think independence is really important, that he can, uh, make his way in the world a bit. I think nowadays it’s really important that you don’t let yourself get pushed around, [...] somehow to not always be dependent on some kind of help.’ (m-nm-a-1)

These three speakers stress different aspects of the overarching topic of autonomy. The first one mentions “going out into the world” and wishes for her children to leave home in order to explore. The second quote emphasises self-confidence, which is associated with trusting oneself and courage. Again, becoming autonomous is described metaphorically here as taking one’s own path away from home. The third interviewee focuses on self-reliance, on being independent from outside help and influence.

It is striking that parents use a discourse which is more often used in the context of parenting older children: namely, adolescents. There is an expectation that parents are supposed to let their adolescent children learn to become independent, but, in this sample, parents talk about their one- or two-year-old children who are, in their eyes, already slowly moving away from them.

Parental pain of separation

Although the theory of intensive parenting describes parents as child-centred, worrying mainly about the wellbeing of their children, the parents in my interview study in fact talked a lot about their own experiences. In the context of handing their child over to someone else, most parents described a strong feeling of wanting to be close to their children and emphasised their own pain of separation. One father expressed a strong sense of his newborn baby’s belonging to him and his wife. When asked when they had given their child to someone else for the first time (which most parents answered with reference to daycare), he spoke of the moment shortly after birth when his mother (the baby’s grandmother) took the baby in her arms (as he stood next to her). The father experienced this moment as an irritation:

‘Yeah, it seemed a little strange to me, even though she had a very professional method and of course knew how to hold such a baby, it was still an awkward moment, yeah, yeah, a little bit of a loss of control, maybe, somehow, to have to, or want to, give him up like that. It didn’t necessarily feel right, yeah, not really bad, either, but sort of a hurdle after all.’ (f-nm-a-1)

This father explains that his feeling was irrational: his mother, a former paediatric nurse, knew how to hold a baby, and he *wanted* to give her the baby, but at the same time he felt that this separation was somehow wrong. In a similar vein, the following mother clearly differentiates between her own feelings and a rational consideration of the child’s wellbeing:

‘Somehow, I just have my reservations about moving him out of our room now, because I’ve gotten so used to it, too, and, um, somehow I find quite, somehow it’s also so nice, you know? (.) I think it’s more because of me than that I think ‘the poor boy!’ or something. [...] Yeah, and somehow I tell myself that this period will pass so quickly, you know, when they are so little and really, you have to enjoy it while it lasts, because they grow up so quickly and at some point they don’t want anything more [laughing] to do with you. Right?’ (m-nm-a-1)

This mother has been thinking about the wellbeing of her son and even concluded that sleeping in another room would not be problematic for him. Therefore, the sleeping arrangement is, for her, not a question of ‘good’ parenting but rather of her own desire. She is the one who enjoys having her son next to her, and the perspective of giving up this nocturnal closeness pains her. She closes her statement with the long-term perspective that a grown-up child will no longer want to be involved with the parents anyway. The fleeting period of mutual closeness is therefore something one should appreciate and enjoy. Other parents similarly argue that time spent with young children is precious because the relationship is only so close for a limited time. Several parents therefore express regret for not having spent more time at home.

But most parents who articulate the wish to be close to their children are ambivalent about it at the same time: they also describe this shared time as potentially annoying or boring. A few mothers even describe a state of distress: they find being at home alone with their child taxing (for a single case analysis of an interview in which a mother very openly talks about her need to spend time on her own, see [Sieben et al, 2018](#)).

When it comes to acclimatisation at daycare, several parents described their own pain of separation in this process. This is interesting, given the public *Rabenmütter* discourse, in which starting daycare is framed as being difficult for the children and as a relief for parents. This discourse assumes that parents, in particular mothers, feel guilty. It should be noted that a few parents in the interview sample (mothers and fathers) did indeed recall feelings of guilt. However, I had expected this guilt to be far more prominent in the interviews. In total, the parental pain of separation was described more intensely than parental guilt. In the interviews, most parents who had gone through the period of acclimatisation at daycare described the process as uncomplicated for their children; instead, they were the ones who suffered.

‘And, um, for me it was so hard – taking leave and pulling myself together a little – and for him it was a lot easier and for me it was really tough.’ (m-m-v-1)

‘I’d say that the first attempts at separation were really painful. [...] Just like that, the first step towards independence, and then he was suddenly not there anymore and then one suddenly had three hours of time [to oneself] again, but then again three hours can be a long time.’ (f-nm-a-2)

In the second quote, the pain of separation is described as having caught the father off guard: the three hours of free time – which he had expected to be enjoyable – seemed like a long time in which he started missing his son. It is also interesting that the father in the second quote frames acclimatisation at daycare as the first step

towards independence. In this respect, he follows the conceptualisation described earlier, which frames growing up as a continuous process of progressive separation. This path into autonomy is simultaneously appraised and bemoaned.

This ambivalence leads parents to keep their emotions in check. They feel obligated to conceal their pain of separation from their children and to pull themselves together:

‘Well, luckily I didn’t bawl, well, I didn’t. I have seen other mothers standing here bawling, and they gave their kids up here. They can’t bear crying, if the child sees the mother bawling and the mother sees that the child is bawling, well, luckily I didn’t have to bawl. In short, though, I thought, I always had the idea, that it is good for the kids.’ (m-nm-a-2)

This mother describes with relief that she (in contrast to other mothers) did not cry at daycare. She could control her emotions by telling herself that daycare benefits her children. Other parents described the professional scheme of acclimatisation at daycare as helpful for themselves:

‘because the parents had already been weaned a little from the kid, you know? Yeah, well, that works in both directions, yeah. Well, one can break loose⁵ pretty well somehow, but well, I was a little bit afraid of, well, eh, well, [...] putting him in strange hands.’ (f-nm-a-1)

In the following, final quote this orientation between seeking autonomy but longing for closeness is put straight:

‘Well, and, yeah, well, I would intentionally seek the closeness, [...] Well, um, I am quicker to seek that closeness, I would say, and, um, I also try, [...] to balance it a little, you know? Well, um, I am aware, and that as well in, in the case of getting used to daycare, that one has to let go, to have a certain distance and independence, uh, so that he can learn those things, too, and, um, he should also have them. Um, yeah, that is just a, a sort of balancing act, you know?’ (f-nm-a-1)

Discussion

Ambivalence in creating closeness and distance

The interviews reveal an ambivalence in creating closeness and distance. As expected from studies on intensive parenting in the Anglo-American context and from Greenfield’s theory, parents in Germany put an emphasis on fostering the cognitive, social and emotional development of their children. Starting daycare at an earlier age than used to be typical (that is, at the age of one or two years instead of three) is legitimised by arguing that the daycare environment benefits children. Furthermore, as Greenfield’s theory predicts and cross-cultural studies on parenting (Keller et al, 2003; 2005) describe, German parents are invested in the idea of their children’s emerging autonomy. In many parents’ minds, enrolment in daycare frequently demarcates the end of the most intimate phase with their children and is framed as ‘the first step towards independence’.

So far, the results coincide well with the descriptions of intensive parenting and Greenfield's theory. Interdependence, however, plays a more important role in the interviews than these theories suggest. These topics show up in two different ways, which are examined in the following sections: first, closeness and interdependence are mentioned as important parenting tools essential to children's healthy development; second, the parents interviewed express a longing for interdependency for their own sakes and expect parenting to provide such an intense experience of closeness.

Reflections on independence and interdependence in 'knowledge societies' and an instrumental focus on parental love

Parents stress that (small) children should be loved, experience a lot of physical affection, and experience continuous attachment. This finding parallels other sociological analyses of parenting cultures: for example, Wall (2018) describes that in Canadian parenting advice documents 'loving the child properly' is the central theme. This is partly replacing the strong focus on cognitive brain development in the past decades, but also adding to it by framing attachment and love as preconditions for cognitive development. These findings also resonate with 'enriching intimacy' (Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011), which has been described as a practice of middle-class parents to combine learning and enjoyment in mutual activities with their child that create emotional closeness. Stefansen and Aarseth (2011) also suggest that parents try to follow their children's lead – which is similar to parents in this study who describe themselves as diagnosing their children's needs and interests.

The reflexive turn to love and affection as key elements of parenting, however, is not really so new. Long before it was seen to shape contemporary parenting culture, it stimulated attachment research in psychology as far back as the 1940s. As argued elsewhere (Kanieski, 2010; Sieben and Yıldırım, 2020), attachment research can be understood as a response to modern forms of childrearing that were clustered around ideas of bodily distance, technically mediated parenting, hygiene and discipline via training programmes in the early 20th century. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, parenting adapted to the cultural values of Gesellschaft-type economies. As Hays (1996) describes, independence and discipline became cornerstones of parenting during this time. There are numerous potential reasons why this thoroughly modern approach to parenting came to be questioned in the middle of the 20th century. First and foremost, the experiences of two wars and their devastating psychosocial effects created a disjuncture in the appraisal of modernity and progress. It was in the midst of these cultural changes that the British psychologist John Bowlby developed attachment theory; he was inspired to look differently at the parent–child relationship by his observation of the effects of hospitalisation, war, or hygiene techniques such as quarantine. The findings from attachment research suggest that the expansion of independence and autonomy into different areas of life has its limitations: early childhood becomes conceptualised as a phase in which too much autonomy and independence can be potentially harmful.

Simultaneously, attachment theory does not question independence as the ultimate goal. On the contrary, strong attachment and close emotional ties in early childhood are requirements for the later development of independence and autonomy. This argument is present in the empirical material analysed in this article, in which parents assume that adults who felt loved as children develop 'stronger personalities' and are

less dependent on others. Parenting young children is thereby conceptualised as a cultural niche, a life phase in which interdependency, closeness, and even dependency between parents and children, are imperative.

On a more general theoretical level, these reflections on the incorporation of Gemeinschaft values in parenting on the basis of psychological research on attachment integrate an important characteristic of Gesellschaft-type economies into Greenfield's (2009) theory: knowledge cultures (Knorr-Cetina, 2007) develop within Gesellschaft-type economies and for these cultures self-reflection is an important element. This means that the changes described by Greenfield – the move towards the cultural values of individualism and independence – do not go unnoticed but become the subject of reflections (for example, scientific research). One's own culture is compared to a real or imaginary past or to a real or imaginary cultural other, discussed and questioned. Parenting is an area which is particularly suitable for being associated with Gemeinschaft values, given infants' undeniable need for continuous care.

Longing for interdependence

The turn to interdependence in parenting is not only a knowledge-based, instrumental decision for the sake of children's development. There is also a more emotional logic behind it. As shown, parents articulate their own desire for closeness and a pain of separation. I suggest framing this wish for closeness and love as a longing for interdependence.

Referring to the cultural psychological work of Boesch (1998) I understand the term 'longing' (*Sehnsucht*) to refer to an emotional sense of loss or lack of someone or something desirable which is out of reach. However, according to Boesch, reaching the desired object does not always make people happy in the way they expected: the fulfilment of a longing often leads to a redirection of longing. Therefore, Boesch describes longing not only as a negative state but also as a positive state that integrates wanting something and keeping the desired object at a distance. Similarly, Scheibe and Epstude (2015) describe the ambivalent emotions in longing and stress that longing has an integrative psychological function: it manages nonrealisability.

'Longing for interdependence' labels parents' complex emotions: they articulate their wish for closeness – but at the same time none of the parents interviewed questions living in a Gesellschaft and or the values of autonomy more generally. Interdependence and closeness thereby become desirable only for a short time, and it is this fleetingness which creates the sense of longing – sometimes alongside a nostalgic perspective on the past (collective or individual). Interestingly, the fleetingness of this phase makes its end appear sad, but is perhaps instrumental in making the phase enjoyable in the first place: some parents articulate feeling uneasy about caring for their child on their own, too. In the interviews, they describe feelings of boredom, limitation or restriction. To sum up, longing for interdependence in the field of parenting is a complex state of mind that involves an acute awareness that this period is fleeting and will end when children develop into independent personalities – an end which parents eagerly anticipate even as they savour the (temporary) closeness and interdependence.

The empirical basis does not allow for a proper analysis of gender as it involves far more interviews with mothers than with fathers. However, I did notice a tendency: only the women in my sample mentioned suffering from too much closeness with their child (see in particular, Sieben et al, 2018), while the men, tendentially, articulated their

wish for closeness and their pain of separation more openly. Similarly, [Westerling \(2015\)](#) has described the desire of Danish fathers to form close and intimate relationships with their children. It might be that the discourse of being ‘stuck’ in parenting is more prevalent in relation to mothers than to fathers. As [Büsken \(2001\)](#) has argued, being at home with children, not working outside the home, and only appearing in the social world as ‘mothers’ are still seen as potential traps for women. Enjoying closeness might work better for fathers, whose return to the world of independence and work is much more taken for granted. Furthermore, women still spend more time with children on average, and the women in this study who express distress from too much closeness were women on parental leave whose partners did not take any parental leave.

To sum up, these reflections, to some extent, question that intensive parenting is as selfless and emotionally absorbing as [Hays \(1996\)](#) has stated and as subsequent empirical studies ([Wall, 2010; 2018; Faircloth, 2014](#)) have characterised it. Parents want parenting to be emotionally absorbing, partly for the development of their child (in the sense of ‘resourcing middle-class children’ [Stefansen and Aarseth, 2011](#)), and partly ‘for themselves’. This is not to deny that parenting can also be exhausting, and is heavily focused on the child. But it is also so intense because parents want something from it: they want to experience interdependency, and the corresponding emotional intensity. This has probably also changed over time: research on the value of children suggests that when societies develop from *Gemeinschaft*- to *Gesellschaft*-types of economy, they value the psychological advantages of having children, such as emotional closeness, more ([Kağıtçibasi and Ataca, 2005](#)). I therefore suggest we should think of intensive parenting as being double-tracked: it involves a child-centred track, and a track centred on the emotional experiences of parents themselves. Although [Hays \(1996\)](#) repeatedly stresses the selflessness of intensive mothering, she does also focus on this longing for interdependence; however, this part of her analysis remains somewhat hidden. Namely, Hays argues that mothers are involved in intensive parenting partly because they want to resist the logic of self-interested competition in the workplace and the cultural values of autonomy and individualism. For Hays, intensive parenting is also an ‘implicit rejection of the ethos of rationalized market society’ and expresses a ‘fundamental ambivalence’ about society ([Hays, 1996: 18](#)).

Conclusion

Parents interviewed for this study simultaneously cherish their children’s development of independence *and* close interdependent bonds within the parent–child relationship. I have analysed this positive approach to interdependence as being twofold. First, parents assume that close bonds are essential for their children’s healthy development and therefore see closeness as a ‘parenting tool’. This approach has been traced back to critical reflections on modernity in ‘knowledge societies’ in general, and, more specifically, to attachment research in psychology. Second, parents express their own desire for closeness which I have called ‘longing for interdependence’.

The more strategic usage of closeness in parenting and the longing for interdependence are not completely distinctive. For example, both come along with a romanticised image of foreign or historical *Gemeinschaften* and their forms of supposed attached parenting (examples include the fieldwork of attachment researchers in *Gemeinschaften*, such as Ainsworth’s [1967] work in Uganda, or the ethnographic

descriptions of the Ye'kuana in Venezuela by Liedloff [1977]). Most visible is this combination in the parenting style of attachment parenting. These references to the 'cultural other' are an interesting field for more cultural psychological research on parenting.

Finally, gender, class and migrant background have been mostly set aside in this article and need further data collection (data on working- and upper-class parents; more data on fathers). I suggest asking two sets of questions: first, how class-specific are practices of balancing independence and interdependence, and how class-dependent is the confidence with one's parenting skills (as described earlier, in this study parents with vocational training seemed to be less confident)? Second, is getting to enjoy interdependence and closeness with one's children a privilege that depends on class, gender and cultural background? Who feels entitled to articulate their longing for interdependence?

Notes

¹ Literally, 'raven mother': this German term has long been used (since the Middle Ages) to describe parents who provide inadequate care for their offspring. Young ravens leave the nest before they can fly and often appear to have been abandoned (although the parents do continue feeding and protecting them).

² Interviewees or their parents came from former Soviet Union or Russia (4), Poland (2), Pakistan (2), former Yugoslavia (2), Kazakhstan (2), Brazil (1), China (1), Turkey (1), Czech Republic (1).

³ The original interview quotes in German are shared here: <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.16790146.v1>

⁴ Interview passages are labelled in the following order: father or mother (f/m), migrant or non-migrant (m/nm), academic or vocational training (a/v), number of children.

⁵ The German here literally means 'detach the umbilical cord'.

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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