

Journal Editor's introduction

Welcome to the latest edition of 'journal corner' where we offer curriculum friendly summaries of papers published in the BSA journal *Sociology*. These are accompanied by an informal interview with authors.

We are delighted to be able to focus this edition on a paper by Professor Rachel Brooks. Rachel is the current President of the British Sociological Association (BSA). As President, Rachel acts as an adviser to the BSA Board of Trustees, hosts the annual conference, sits on prize judging panels and presides over award ceremonies. The President also helps the BSA respond to matters affecting the discipline of sociology.

In this journal corner, we focus our discussion on Rachel's co-authored paper, titled: Paradoxical Parenting Practices and Australian Higher Education (2025). This paper is open access and free to download.

As we note below – and Rachel touches on in the interview – Rachel's article speaks to important themes across the curriculum, including family and education. It also helps us think about the methods we use as sociologists. As well as our usual interview questions, we also take the opportunity to ask Rachel to reflect on her role as BSA President and get her thoughts on the future of the discipline.

As always, we hope that this will inspire wide-ranging, and critical, discussion. At the end of the summary we do include some possible questions/discussion prompts which came to our minds when reading.

Best wishes

The Editors of *Sociology*

Paradoxical Parenting Practices and Australian Higher Education

The article by Rachel Brooks, Julia Cook and Dan Woodman is interested in the types of support parents provide to their children while they are at university. The authors draw “on interviews with 30 Australian parents to explore parenting practices as they pertain to higher education” (page 1). They use vignettes to explore normative views about parental engagement; as well as ask about the type of support parents actually provide to their children while they are at university.

Conceptually, the authors are interested in whether parenting practices are ‘intensive’ in nature. ‘Intensive parenting’ is the “foregrounding of a child’s needs and the devotion of significant, time, money and energy to their care” (page 2). The concept originated in the USA and was originally documented in middle-class families and in high income Anglophone countries. However, recent years have shown the concept to have utility across countries and socio-economic spectrums. Children have been positioned as potentially at-risk and as in need of (intensive) parental supervision and intervention. Brooks and colleagues note how education has taken on a particular importance in these discussions. Neo-liberal social policy has transferred responsibility for successful education outcomes to parents – encouraging parents to monitor schoolwork, provide direct assistance and create the ‘right’ conditions for children to take on self-responsibility.

For the authors, discussions of intensive parenting have focused largely on how *young children* are being brought up. There has therefore been much less research on the extent to which intensive parenting practices are played out with respect to higher education. Questions also remain about whether practices documented in the UK and USA are played out in all national contexts. Addressing these two challenges the authors look at parenting practices with respect to the Australian higher education system.

The authors frame their findings around two core themes:

‘The paradoxical foregrounding of ‘independence’: Parents emphasised ‘independence’ when talking about their relationship with their children. For example, saying that they need to ‘find for themselves’ and ‘they’re an adult and if they’re at university it is adult learning’ (page 7). At the same time, the participants also talked about things like ‘being in the background, pushing’ (page 8) – which seemed to work against the idea of independence.

Nature of support and intervention: Four main types of parental support were identified in the participants’ narratives; namely financial support, coaching approach, encouragement to use university services and direct academic interventions. As the authors note, whilst some of these practices seem very similar to what we know about ‘intensive parenting’ others show how it’s form can evolve as children get older. Coaching techniques, for example, seem to suggest the transfer of practices from the workplace to the private sphere.

Hence the idea of a paradox – an apparent contradiction – in the title of their paper. Yet, none of their interviewees remarked on the tension between the importance of independence on the one hand and numerous examples of parental interventions on the other. This raises the questions about why parents continue to see university as a space of independence given the various forms of support they were giving their children. For Brooks and colleagues while “the

extant literature would suggest that admitting to engaging in intensive practices may be viewed as a mark of 'good parenting for those with younger children, this appears to be less the case for those with older children, because of the enduring discursive power of norms associated with 'independence' and 'self-reliance'.

This paper touches on a number of important sociological issues of direct relevance across the curriculum. In her interview, Rachel talks about how the paper speaks to the sociology of education and the sociology of the family. Here, we wish to briefly touch upon two further areas.

Methods: The study by Brooks and colleagues is really interesting methodologically. It uses data from a longitudinal research programme which has followed the same sample of participants since 1991. The authors also used vignettes. One vignette described a scenario about a student having difficulties at university and then asked 'what should the student's parents do in this situation' (page 7). It therefore opened up a less personal discussion. It also shifted the discussion to normative aspects and asked what participants thought people *should* do. Although quite old, this short piece [here](#) still does a good job of outlining some of the pros and cons of using vignettes in social research.

Gender: The final sample included 30 participants – fifteen of whom identified as men and 15 whom identified as women. The authors say that this gender balance was important due to the previously highlighted gendered nature of parenting roles and expectations. Indeed, much has been written about 'intensive mothering' (see Hays, for example) and how this demands that women continue to be the primary caregivers, that women lavish large amounts of time and energy on their children, and that the work of mothering is outside the scope of market valuation because children are considered/constructed as pure and priceless (see Hallstein 2006, for example, [here](#)). Brooks and colleagues do present data which seems to suggest that both men and women are involved in 'intensive parenting'.

Possible questions/discussion prompts which came to our minds when reading:

Do the findings resonate? Has education become an important part of 'intensive parenting'? Does parenting change relationally over the course of childhood, adolescence and early adulthood? Are there sometimes tensions and contradictions in what it means to be a 'good' parent?

Are vignettes a useful methodological tool? What might the differences be between asking about perceptions and norms versus asking about personal practices and choices?

Do we think men and women are involved in 'intensive parenting' equally? What might that tell us about parenting and gender equality more generally?

Interview

Rachel is currently Professor of Higher Education in the Department of Education at Oxford and current President of the British Sociological Association. She is also chair of the executive editors of the British Journal of Sociology of Education, a member of the editorial team of the journal Sociology, a co-editor of the 'Research into Higher Education' book series and a member of governing council of the Economic and Social Research Council. Rachel was also a member of the education sub-panel for the UK's national research assessment exercise (REF2021).

Editors – Thank you, Rachel, for agreeing to be interviewed for this edition of journal corner. Before we get to the paper, I wonder if you could tell us what being President of the BSA involves.

I've really enjoyed the role so far – partially because of the diversity of activities with which I've been able to get involved. A key aspect is being the public face of the BSA, and so I was very involved in the BSA annual conference in April; have been on the judging panel for various BSA awards; will represent the BSA in the forthcoming QAA review of the subject benchmarks for sociology; and have given quite a few talks to A Level students. In addition, I've chosen to run several activities specifically on education (my area of research) during my presidency. With Carli Rowell from the University of Sussex, I organised a half-day conference on teaching sociology in higher education last year, and we are currently guest-editing a special issue of the journal 'Sociology' based on the contributions to this event. I'm also in the midst of planning a one-day conference in June on 'the future of sociology of education', and am looking forward to running a session of the International Sociological Association Forum in July on 'contested knowledges and international student mobility'.

So what led you to decide on a career in sociology?

My first degree was in history and my master's in educational studies. I decided to do a PhD after working for a few years for an educational research charity, and wanting to explore - in more depth than was possible in my job - some of the issues we were looking at, specifically in relation to young people's higher education choices. Sociology seemed to offer the best insights into these issues, by providing the theoretical resources to explore the societal, institutional, familial and peer influences on young people's decisions, rather than viewing such decisions as something that an individual student makes alone. Despite starting my PhD on a part-time basis while working full-time, I soon decided that I would love to work in higher education - teaching and researching various topics related to the sociology of education.

That brings us nicely to the paper we are discussing. What conclusions would you like people to draw from the study?

We hope that the article speaks to debates in both the sociology of the family and the sociology of education. In relation to the former, we show that 'intensive parenting' practices (i.e. those that require parents to commit significant amounts of time, money and energy to their child's care) are not solely confined to the parenting of young children. Indeed, many of the parents of

children in higher education, who were involved in our research, had taken a very active and involved role in their children's lives while they were university students – even, in some cases, intervening directly in their academic studies. With respect to the sociology of education, we demonstrate how, despite these kinds of intensive practices, parents typically remained committed to seeing university as a space of 'independence' and downplayed their involvement in their children's lives. This, we argue, can be problematic – as it may mask the degree to which the government has shifted responsibilities (particularly for paying for higher education) away from the state to parents. Although we focus on Australia, there may well be parallels with what is happening in the UK, too.

What do you remember most about doing the research?

The research is based on a larger project called 'Life Patterns' that I've been working on, with colleagues in Australia, over the past few years. It is following several cohorts of Australians from the time they leave school: the oldest cohort was recruited in 1991 and the participants from that group are now in their 50s (they are the ones we interviewed for the article). It's been fascinating to explore the extent to which being a young person in the 21st century differs from being a similar age in the 1990s. I've also very much enjoyed working with my Australian colleagues on this – mainly through online meetings and email – but I've also had a few trips to the University of Melbourne (where the study is based), which have been a great adventure.

Where next for your research?

We still have quite a lot of further work to do as part of the Life Patterns project – it will be very interesting to see how the latest cohort of young people we have recruited (in 2022-23) compares to the cohorts recruited in 1991 and 2005 as they grow older, move into the labour market and establish families of their own.

Alongside this, there are various other research projects I'm working on, including an international comparison of how higher education does (or does not) contribute to social mobility, and another international study of 'virtual international student mobilities' (when students study online courses offered by providers in another country). However, the project I'm most excited about is a longitudinal study of students and politics that we're just about to start - this will track undergraduate students across the three years of their degree programme to examine the extent to which their higher education has any impact on their political views, knowledge and/or behaviour.

And where next for the future of the discipline, do you think?

Although, in some ways, sociology is going through a rather tough time – with some university departments reducing the number of sociology staff – in other respects, there is lots of be positive about. Sociology continues to be a very popular A Level subject and, over recent years,

we have seen a lot of interest in the BSA's 'Young Sociologist' competition (which is targeted at A Level students). In addition, some universities are opening up Sociology programmes for the first time – this has happened recently at UCL, for example, and a new course is starting soon at Reading. With all the challenges that the world faces at present, we are in more need than ever for people who are able to analyse socio-political developments in a critical manner and convince others of the value of a 'sociological imagination'.