

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Parenting as contested practice between experts, audiences, and selves: An introduction

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Abstract

Interrogating what constitutes “good parenting” captures and reflects multiple debates within and across different societies, milieus, and power constellations. In this Special Issue, *Contested Parenting, Experts, Audiences, Selves*, we bring together seven articles and a commentary that tackle how people move through the labyrinth of diverse knowledge formations and when they reproduce themselves as “good” via their own considerations of parenting models. This introduction advocates for understanding parenting as the encounter between at least three groups of actors: first, the parents themselves, who work with their own parenting imaginations while also addressing the expectations and role ascriptions of “ideal types” of personhood; second, the experts—professional or self-ascribed—who represent a central authority on how to observe, comment, and, if necessary, intervene; and finally, audiences, including not only (other) parents and experts but also in-laws, neighbors, and any onlooking member of an imagined community that apparently observes and judges whether parenting is done in the right, the good, and the appropriate ways. This three-fold perspective sees this introduction concentrate on classed, gendered, and racialized parenting imaginaries by exploring the subjectification of parents in and through the idea and the practice of raising—or not raising—children.

KEYWORDS

expertise, morality, parenting, politics, subjectification

French abstract

Interroger ce qui constitue la « bonne parentalité » reflète et capture de multiples débats au sein et à travers différentes

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sociétés, milieux et configurations de pouvoir. Dans ce numéro spécial, *Parentalité contestée. Experts, publics, subjectivités*, nous rassemblons sept articles et un commentaire qui analysent la manière dont les acteurs différents naviguent un labyrinthe des diverses formations de savoir et comment ils se reproduisent eux-mêmes en tant que « bons » à travers leurs propres conceptions des modèles parentaux. Cette introduction plaide pour une compréhension de la parentalité comme une rencontre entre au moins trois groupes d'acteurs : tout d'abord, les parents eux-mêmes, qui élaborent leurs propres imaginaires parentaux tout en prenant en compte les attentes et les assignations de rôle associées aux « types idéaux » de la personne; ensuite, les experts—professionnels ou autoproclamés—qui constituent une autorité centrale pour observer, commenter et, si nécessaire, intervenir; enfin, les publics, comprenant non seulement (d'autres) parents et experts, mais aussi les beaux-parents, les voisins et tout membre d'une communauté imaginée qui, observe et juge si la parentalité est exercée de manière juste, bonne et appropriée. Cette perspective tripartite conduit cette introduction à se concentrer sur les imaginaires parentaux marqués par des dimensions de classe, de genre et de race, en explorant la subjectivation des parents à travers l'idée et la pratique d'éduquer—ou de ne pas éduquer—des enfants.

Portuguese abstract

Interrogar o que constitui uma “boa parentalidade” reflete e captura múltiplos debates dentro e entre diferentes sociedades, contextos e configurações de poder. Nesta edição especial, *Parentalidade Contestada. Especialistas, Públicos, Subjetividades*, reunimos sete artigos e um comentário que analisam como as pessoas navegam pelo labirinto das diversas formações de conhecimento e como se reproduzem como “bons” por meio de suas próprias concepções sobre modelos parentais. Esta introdução defende a compreensão da parentalidade como o encontro entre, pelo menos, três grupos de atores: primeiro, os próprios pais, que elaboram seus próprios imaginários parentais ao mesmo tempo em que consideram as expectativas e atribuições de papel associadas aos ‘tipos ideais’ de pessoa; segundo, os especialistas—profissionais ou autoproclamados—que representam uma autoridade central sobre como observar, comentar e, se necessário, intervir; e, por fim, os públicos, que incluem não apenas (outros) pais e especialistas, mas também sogros, vizinhos e qualquer membro de uma comunidade imaginada que, aparentemente, observa e julga se a parentalidade é exercida de maneira correta, boa e apropriada. Essa perspectiva

tripartite leva esta introdução a se concentrar nos imaginários parentais marcados por dimensões de classe, gênero e raça, explorando a subjetivação dos pais através da ideia e da prática de educar—ou não educar—crianças.

INTRODUCTION

Parenting extends far beyond the idea, the activity, the relationship, and the accomplishment of raising a child. Instead, it is a heavily moralized social field that brings together multiple actors, including relatives, experts, state representatives, and peers (Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Strathern, 2005, 2011). As a practice deemed “skilled” that is assumed to determine not only the health and development of children but even the potential and well-being of entire societies, parenting around the world is considered too important a task to be left to parents alone (Lee et al., 2014, 38). A rich tradition of anthropological and historical scholarship acknowledges that parenting has always been morally charged in different ways (Allman, 1994; Badinter, 1981). Parenting appears in the literature as a contingent, contested, and monitored practice in which a wide range of actors participate in the collective making of “good” mothers and fathers and, eventually, “good” children (Ariès, 1962; Hardyment, 2007; Harkness & Super, 1996; LeVine, 1994; Mead & Wolfenstein, 1955; Otto & Keller, 2014; Stack, 1974). Additionally, recent scholarship has pointed to the global diffusion of universal norms of “proper parenthood” through people’s global mobilities, children’s rights regimes, and popular and media cultures (Bundgaard & Olwig, 2018; Cheney, 2019; De Koning et al., 2022; Faircloth et al., 2013; Thelen & Haukanes, 2010). Parental subjectivities, anxieties, and reproductive practices seem to be increasingly intertwined with classed and racialized performances of morality (Lareau, 2003; Pande, 2022; Perrier, 2013). Some scholars even speak of a “parentalization of the social” in a neoliberal globalized world (Martin & Leloup, 2020), with children becoming the “projects” of upwardly mobile middle-class entrepreneurs (Freeman, 2014) and “child-centered nodules of urbanism” (Ramos-Zayas, 2020, 13–15), the locus of elite sociability and morality.

With this Special Issue of *Ethos. Journal of the Society for Psychological Anthropology*, we pursue two aims. First, we interrogate these universalizing assumptions. By using ethnographic data to examine parenting as both a contested idea and a negotiated practice, this collection of articles addresses the nature of parenting in different settings, situations, and social milieus across different world regions. Rather than simply demonstrate that parenting is contested, monitored, and negotiated in different contexts, or that universalizing approaches to childcare are permeating broadly, we want to scrutinize the nexus between childcare, parenting, and morality using in-depth ethnographic analysis. Our papers invite readers to “think through the make-up and effects [...] and to reexamine some of the core elements of contemporary reproductive governance” (Fonseca, 2025) of contemporary societies after the so-called “parenting turn” (Lee et al., 2014). This approach allows us to implicitly target problematic tendencies in the study of early child development and parental care that all too often start from universalizing claims (Remorini, 2024; Scheidecker et al., 2023), something at times even understood as epistemic violence (Oppong, 2023; Teo, 2010). Building on these critical calls to decolonize psychological anthropology and earlier parenting studies that discussed the nexus between morality, personhood, and self—with comparative reference to child-raising practices and so-called character-formation theories (Bledsoe, 1990; Gottlieb, 2004; LeVine, 1994; Riesman, 1992)—our contributions concentrate on classed, gendered, and racialized parenting imaginaries by exploring the subjectification of parents in and through the idea and the practice of raising (or not raising) children—and doing so in particular ways. Generally, societies confronted with political, economic, technological, or social changes also recalibrate these challenges via their own understandings of parenting norms and values. Examples range from shifting understandings of parental duties under conditions of radical political transformation (e.g., postwar conditions), to the collective handling of technological and legal innovations (as in the field of reproductive technologies), newly emerging social duties under conditions of economic crisis and austerity politics, and pandemic-induced spatial restrictions that see burdens assigned

according to the gendered care roles of parents. It is especially the diversity of moralizing assumptions around parenting that we aim to address.

Second, we advocate understanding parenting as a specific form of social practice that includes at least three groups of actors. First, the parents themselves work with their own parenting imaginations while also contending with the expectations and role ascriptions of “ideal types” of personhood that are ultimately realized through parenting. Second, professional or self-ascribed experts assert themselves as key members and even representatives of certain knowledge regimes, occupying a central position of authority on questions of observing, commenting, controlling, and, if necessary, intervening in the self-perceptions of parents. Finally, we consider audiences, a (more or less to varying degrees) diffuse group of actors that includes not only other parents and experts but also in-laws, neighbors, strangers in the street, the woman offering unsolicited advice in the supermarket queue—that is, all those bystanders in an imagined community of the apparently responsible who seemingly observe and judge whether parenting is done in the right, the good, and the appropriate ways. Of course, these audiences also include children, as this issue’s insightful contribution from Dinah Hannaford (2025) on expat families in Senegal demonstrates.

Raising “good” children—that is, raising moral, sentient, and knowledgeable children—has been described as a “universal function of the family” (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007, 5). Beyond this universal notion lies the question of who shares responsibility within the family and which virtues or values contribute to defining “moral worthiness.” For Cheryl Mattingly, parents “encounter [...] and navigate multiple moral normativities and authorities, including ones that clash with their own sense of a ‘good life’ for their children” (Mattingly, 2014a, 8). Being a good parent apparently requires ongoing commitment, meticulous boundary work, the right mindset, and constant support or even policing from different types of communities. Parenting plays a pivotal role in setting or defending boundaries in classed (Donzelot, 1979; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Lareau, 2003) and racialized (Abdill, 2018; Briggs, 2020; Pande, 2022) as well as transcultural and diasporic settings (Drotbohm, 2013; Feldman-Savelsberg, 2020).

The question of what constitutes “good parenting” mirrors multiple societal debates. The apparent absence of the “black father” in the Caribbean or the “absent migrating mother” in transnational constellations is alleged to not only impact the individual family but also transform entire societies (Abdill, 2018; Åkesson et al., 2012; Drotbohm, 2023; Findlay, 2014; Smith et al., 2005; see also Heron, 2025). In other cases too, social ills such as depression, poverty, and dependency are associated with parenting labeled “poor,” that is, parenting practices that need monitoring in some way, whether the stereotypical “teenage welfare mother,” whose dependency on social welfare is believed to beget yet another generation of poor children (Arai, 2009; Luker, 1997; Wacquant, 2009, 76–84), or the overprotective “helicopter parents,” considered the root cause for entire generations being unable to live happy lives (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Maas, 2021, 2024; Wahyuni et al., 2023). These debates all turn parenting into a “central governmental domain where concerns about, and hopes for, the future of society intersect with notions of citizenship, family care, welfare, and deservingness of public resources” (De Koning et al., 2022, 321; see also Ramos-Zayas, 2025). In her insightful commentary to this Special Issue, Claudia Fonseca (2025) problematizes how the enormous expectations and responsibility loaded on parents’ shoulders justify normalizing technologies of family governance and pedagogical intervention on the side of (apparently incapable) adults in contexts where public daycare, schooling, and health-care services in fact are frequently absent.

Whether it is the welfare state or other observing and policing institutions, all communities have criteria for intervening in cases of endangerment, serious neglect, or abuse. In N’Guessan’s work with child welfare officers in Côte d’Ivoire, the detection of severely malnourished children or physical abuse sets in motion routine steps of intervention that involve not only state actors (social welfare officers, schoolteachers, or the gendarmerie) but also community actors (e.g., religious leaders or neighborhood authorities). For child welfare officers, it is crucial not only in terms of building trust and gaining access to communities who—perhaps rightfully so, as in the case of undocumented migrants—mistrust state institutions and their bureaucratic practices but, moreover, because it promotes their work as “caring” and watchful. Yet, in some cases, particularly in multiethnic societies or diasporic settings, competing moral regimes can clash, leading to perceptions of “failing” performances of “good parenting” (see Abdill, 2018; Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2020; Engebrigtsen, 2012). The same holds true for cross-border livelihoods when the question of what

kinds of practices actually constitute “good parenting” can ultimately even determine who is actually to be included in “the family”—and this can happen through not only institutional intervention but also through family practices themselves (Drotbohm, 2018, 2023).

Another widely discussed question concerns the universalizing hegemonic regime of attachment theory, something closely linked to societies deemed “individualistic” or “neoliberal.” However, for Otto and Keller (2014), “different faces of attachment” show that the goal is not always raising children to be autonomous selves. In her work on Javanese childrearing practices, Keeler (2023) recently elaborated on this notion in the context of shame in hierarchical relationships. Schmidt et al. (2023), Lamm et al. (2023), and Scheidecker (2023) have also illustrated the different facets of “attachment” for questioning the assumption that there is a need for one caregiver (usually the mother) to develop stable emotional bonds for the child to thrive. Certainly, as they demonstrate, “cultural difference” is not necessarily what is at stake here. What is considered “good parenting” sometimes changes in a given setting within only a few years. The most recent insights of “neuroscience” or brain development theory have led some scholars to speak of “neuroparenting” (Macvarish, 2016) to describe how parenting advice is increasingly rooted in supposedly universal scientific claims (see Snoek & Horstkötter, 2021). In these times, the vocabulary of neuroscience has become part and parcel of parental talk. From a sociological or anthropological perspective, neuroparenting—and especially the incorporation of neuroscience into global child development programs—has been criticized for being class-blind and Eurocentric at best, racist at worst (see Lowe et al., 2015; Scheidecker et al., 2023), and in need of a decolonial re-reading (Oppong, 2023). Our Special Issue contributes to this diversity of standpoints and critical perspectives.

Parenting in this expert guidance mode often takes the form of elite or middle-class identity projects that see one’s children become part of one’s identity (Hays, 1996; Ramos-Zayas, 2020). Furthermore, because children are often considered the most vulnerable, the most cherished, and the incarnation of the future of society, these transformations do not go uncontested, frequently introducing deep generational conflicts (Bristow, 2019). According to British sociologist Frank Furedi, this can even prompt the emergence of “culture wars over socialization” (Furedi, 2021). But even without such grand theorization, ethnographic scholarship has recognized that more nuanced, dynamic, and complex forms of parental care challenge gendered norms by producing new attitudes and practices that may even be considered counter-hegemonic (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021; Averett, 2021; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), eventually linked to religious (Smith, 2014; Soothill, 2007; Van Klinken, 2013) or classed subjectivities (see Cornwall, 2002; McLean, 2021; N’Guessan, 2024; Powis & Bunkley, 2023). In this sense, intimate fathering provided Ivorian (N’Guessan, 2024) and Dominican (Heron, 2018) men with the option of an alternative and attractive way of living, a chance to renegotiate and reevaluate gender roles and the relations between nuclear and extended families, and the possibility of crafting imaginaries of childhood that greatly differ from their own experiences.

Already Back in 2007, Ochs and Kremer-Sadlik remarked that there was “surprisingly little research on how morality is enacted and socialized through family interactions involving children” (2007, 5). By addressing “first persons’ perspectives on moral striving” (Mattingly, 2014a, 12)—rather than morality as such—Mattingly later shifted the focus to social practice, a move coupled with the emerging research on parenting rather than *parenthood*. Following this path, our Special Issue suggests exploring parenting both as a contested practice and as an (aspirational) performance. We inquire about the identities of the actors involved in parenting and the experts designated and addressed as trusted authorities that evaluate the appropriateness of parenting, and we ask which kinds of audiences parents use as their points of reference. That is, what contributes to the self-perception of parents—whose observing gaze, assessment, and judgment? We consider the kinds of conflicts these encounters entail and the ways that notions of experts and audiences are eventually questioned, circumvented, or subverted. Finally, we are also interested in the views and self-perceptions of parents themselves, especially their engagement with the fact that parenting is not uniquely predetermined. This means asking what kinds of selves they imagine through their own everyday practices, what kind of self is considered desirable, and what hidden assumptions are at play in asking these questions. In responding, we address the possibilities of navigating between

different role models and ideals, especially in times of conflict, and inquire into the implications of these subjectivities for an individual's sense of belonging, between kin, gender, and citizenship.

As such, collective contestations over moral assumptions, the provision of family welfare, and regimes of expertise not only articulate “oppressive” control practices but can also be experienced as empowering and supportive (see, e.g., Stack, 1974) while fueling parental practices of distinction and parental self-making, with parents consciously positioning themselves within the realm of possible modes of being “good.” At the same time, the examples demonstrate that parenting experts tend to follow the logics of classed and gendered hierarchies. Through close readings of comparable parent-expert encounters, the papers in this Special Issue analyze parenting as a case study in unequal and stratified social reproduction.

Parents may aspire toward certain parenting imaginations even as these moral aims remain beyond reach. Eventually, social, political, and economic conditions may hamper parents' desires or capacities to behave and act in a certain way (see Mai & Scheidecker, 2025; N'Guessan, 2022; Vrăbiescu & Kalir, 2018). As Claudia Fonseca has made clear by exploring the knowledge forms and gendered moralities extant in Brazil's infant care policies (Fonseca, 2022), class dimensions and facilitated access to daycare—especially for poor families—remain crucial to understanding how adequate forms of care and the well-being of children in their families can be assured.

In this Special Issue, we consider it necessary to examine how people move through this “labyrinth of knowledge forms” (Fonseca, 2022, 555) and when they reproduce themselves as “good” based on their own considerations of parenting models. Ultimately, good parenting imaginaries also depend on class or racialized privileges (Hannaford, 2020, 2025; Ramos-Zayas, 2020), and parenting must also be contextualized against social ills, such as social inequality and poverty (Carpenter-Song, 2019; De Koning & Ruijtenberg, 2022). We must rethink the link between parental care and child development in our approach to racialized or gendered normativities of “doing the best I can” (Edin & Nelson, 2013) and the care of needy, disabled, or chronically sick children (Freitag, 2018; Jackson, 2021; Kelly, 2005; Mattingly, 2014a) and those that may be considered to have “fallen far from the tree” (Solomon, 2012).

The seven papers collected in this Special Issue are dedicated to all these dimensions of contested parenting in different settings. This includes different regional and national contexts and distinctions between social milieus, class backgrounds, genders, sexualities, and generations.

In “What Exactly is a Family Man? Performing, Precluding and Interrogating Respectable Selves in Dominica,” **Adom Heron** contradicts those studies that focus on Caribbean single motherhood and especially the stereotypical absent father in postslavery societies. He presents the life story of a father on the Caribbean island of Dominica to investigate the politics of recognizing fatherhood and understanding “respectable” masculinity. Tracking this father's redemptive journey toward “living right,” Heron asks who qualifies as a father within Caribbean popular consciousness. His analysis unpicks the various class, color, and gender signifiers that coalesce with the goal of understanding how Dominica's stratified social landscape denies working-class men access to the lauded status of “family man” and, with it, recognition as fathers.

Konstanze N'Guessan's paper “Making Beautiful Babies. Parental Determinism, Performative Parenting and Personhood in Côte d'Ivoire” explores baby shows, pregnancy consultations, and infant health reviews as performative parenting encounters in which parents, social welfare officers, and midwives interact as actors in and audiences of “good parenting.” The paper looks at the different ways in which parental determinism is enacted and discussed, and how “doing good” as a parent and the well-being of children are grasped as entangled and mutually constitutive. The paper demonstrates that “beautiful babies” are a product of a shared understanding and co-practice. Making “beautiful babies” requires communal efforts to “be good” and “do good,” invoking the subjectivities of both parents and experts alongside their acts of parenting and counseling.

The contribution by **Camila Fernandes and Laura Lowenkron**, “Motherhood Amidst Reprimands and Advice: Child Care, Motherhood Experiences and Class in Rio de Janeiro,” explores the fact that comparative considerations of parenting norms provide information about how specific social classes or milieus internalize and communicate their expectations to themselves. Using two ethnographic case studies from two different socio-cultural milieus—one in a favela and one in a daycare center in a middle-class

neighborhood—they concentrate on the tensions and moralizing positionings that surfaced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Differing from the pedagogical sciences, which tend to concentrate on the speech acts directed from parents to their children (Kurniawan, 2023), they examine scolding and advice circulating between either experts and parents or parents alone. By comparing the expectations and demands placed on mothers with very different educational and income resources, the article pinpoints how different forms of maternity are morally valued and legitimized while others become targets of prejudice and discrimination.

Comparably, **Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg's** contribution, "Contesting Parenting Expertise: Constructing Good Mothering and Searching for Dignity in Cameroonian Berlin," addresses the changing nature of parenting by concentrating on the interactions between migrants who act simultaneously as informal experts in and as audiences for childrearing practices within their own migrant community. Feldman-Savelsberg observes how, in contrast to the recently arrived Cameroonian migrants who ultimately expect the continuation of distributive parenting, migrants from middle-class and academic backgrounds (in particular) orient their parenting practices toward a globalizing middle-class script of concerted cultivation. By providing an example of their own "good" parenting style, they intend to not only lift the reputation of the community and counter negative stereotypes but also achieve respect in a social environment that often acts disrespectfully toward women, especially African immigrant women.

Dinah Hannaford's article "Aid Workers Parenting in the Field: Children-as-Audience and the Generational Transmission of Privilege in Senegal" tackles the distinct form of class-specific consciousness observed among expat aid workers in Senegal, who parent their children while stationed overseas. Due to the extremely high salaries, expat parents can afford not only elevated lifestyles in segregated neighborhoods but also extremely cheap domestic employees. In her article, Hannaford concentrates on the crucial position of the children of expats, who act as audiences that observe and eventually mirror the attitudes of their parents. While the parents try to make the world more equitable but still contribute to an unequal distribution of power and wealth, their children's behavior tends to reproduce their parents' privileges. In this morally charged environment, where the wealth disparities of this postcolonial labor economy are certainly known but often still un(der)reflected, the children's observing presence tends to generate considerable uneasiness for the negotiation of the parental self.

In "Help Can Harm: Unintended Consequences of Child Protection and Parenting Support for Vietnamese Immigrant Families in Germany," **Nga Thi Thanh Mai and Gabriel Scheidecker** focus on the disruptive or destructive facets of parenting expertise and audiences in the families studied, recent migrants from Vietnam to Berlin. They differentiate what they call the "unintended consequences" of parenting support on three levels and demonstrate how Vietnamese mothers deal with these moral reproaches of "failing" to meet the standards set by the evaluating institutions by "pretending" compliance or otherwise adopting ineffective (at best) or harmful (at worst) adaptations to the set ideal. They conclude that rather than "improving parents," it is parenting support services that need improvement, acknowledging the real-world diversity of parenting practices in heterogeneous societies.

As the final contribution to this Special Issue, the work of **Ana Ramos-Zayas** allows us to consider the identities of global elites who cultivate their personal freedom via a particular approach to the potentialities of parenting: the possibility and option of childlessness. Her paper, "Disrupting the Social by Centering the Self: Life Coaching and the Politics of Marriage, Motherhood, and Adult Sociability among Latinx and Latin American Women," focuses on established Latinx and Latin American life coaching practices that tend to decouple marriage readiness from an actual partner or mothering from an actual child. Attending one-on-one life coaching sessions, Ramos-Zayas observes how these women's aspirations toward self-cultivation and emotional-spiritual growth are redirected inward. Through their therapeutic dialogues, life coaches and clients contest child-centered women's identities and heteronormative family lives, refashioning a desired cosmopolitan female self that foregrounds different forms of social ties and disrupts society's attempt to control a person's life through parenting ideals.

The selection of papers does not aim to contrast nor compare different child welfare regimes, parenting norms, or policies. Instead, it intends to open an analytic window into the contested nature of parenting at the interplay of globally diffused and supposedly universalist assumptions, community- and

experience-related moralities, and self-choreographies. By focusing on case studies centered in either the Global South or migrant communities in the Global North, we disrupt the Eurocentric assumptions that seem to understand the accelerated social change of parenting cultures as part of Western modernity. In particular, our contributions emphasize parenting's position as a power-laden tangle of political and public interests that intersect with the seemingly personal or intimate dimensions of raising children, centering on the unequal dynamics between “experts,” “audiences,” and “selves.”

The first of these three terms, “**experts**,” refers to the actors that assemble across parenting discourses, practices, and policies (e.g., midwives, pediatricians, psychological and nutrition counselors, lawyers, social or youth welfare officers, managers of childcare facilities, life coaches, and religious specialists) and who exercise enormous powers in terms of evaluating the stratified responsibilities and means by which parents strive for social recognition, success, and a “good” life. As this compilation of case studies shows, experts operate at very different levels of legal and political formalization. Experts are important social actors who play a significant role in the decision for or against parenthood, as Ramos-Zayas’ article on life coaching and the politics of Latinx and Latin American women in the United States makes clear. Experts can also support the actions and attitudes of parents, present them with alternative modes of behavior in the event of conflict, and, of course, strengthen the interests of children who have little power in many settings. However—as the work of Mai and Scheidecker (in particular) shows—experts such as state representatives can also contribute to the “dark side” of parenting support, situations that negotiate, question, and possibly even break the legitimate place of the child within the family (see also Vrăbiescu & Kalir, 2018). Concepts such as “normal childhoods” and “optimal parenting,” specified through scientifically legitimized doctrines, can produce suspicion on the side of practitioners and avoidance on the side of parents, in spite of all the best intentions (Mai & Scheidecker, 2025). Expert assumptions concerning values and standards possibly link the child’s best interests to such moralized topics as feeding and sleeping habits, media and drug consumption, “toxic” stress, “neglected” children, and “unstable” families. In conjunction with child development metrics, these evaluations eventually contribute to the image of the “good” child as something that intensive parental engagement can anticipate, optimize, and produce (Frankenhuis & Amir, 2022; Heimerdinger, 2019).

In addition to the official experts mentioned above, numerous informal experts also occupy this position, on the basis of their experience or self-taught knowledge, and claim the legitimacy to provide advice, encouragement, or criticism. Within the Cameroonian diaspora in Germany, as Pamela Feldman-Savelsberg shows, so-called “first-comers” can serve as brokers, translating the normativities of institutionally certified parenting experts (pedagogical, social service, and medical personnel) to their extended kin or compatriots. By circulating stories of encounters with teachers, doctors, and bureaucrats in the course of everyday parenting, these Cameroonian migrant women develop middle-class competencies and symbolic capital for themselves and their children (Feldman-Savelsberg, 2025). In the case study presented by Fernandes and Lowenkron, formal administrative procedures in an opaque childcare system in Brazil play together with diffusely distributed expertise, which, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, activated further actors and unstable knowledge to teach parents—and mothers in particular—what good parenting can mean in times of crisis (Fernandes & Lowenkron, 2025). Through the everyday act of living with and raising their child or children, women and men learn to perceive their “reproductive identity” (Athan, 2020) as competent mothers and fathers with new responsibilities, duties, capacities, and rights. N’Guessan’s paper on the making of beautiful babies demonstrates that it is often considered insufficient to be caring; parents also have to be “competent,” something that involves dialoguing with expert guidance to make the correct decisions (N’Guessan, 2025). In Hannaford’s paper on expat families, neighbors, extended family, members of one’s migrant community, and domestic workers can constitute elements of a “critical public” that judges and polices the moral grounds of parenting work (Hannaford, 2025). It is worth recognizing here that an “expert gaze” can materialize in the making of “parental ethnotheories” of good care through not only articulations of acceptance, recognition, and respect but also acts of disapproval and intervention (Harkness & Super, 1996; Liu & Tobin, 2021).

The term “**audiences**” captures the fact that parenting is an act not only of being but also of becoming, a performative practice oriented toward *collective* grounds. One such audience is society at large, as Heron

(2025) describes: “the imagined wider community [...] who collectively figures the discursive image of the ‘family man’ [...] against the persistent imagining of working-class fathers as problem.” However, audiences may also be more interactional and relational. In social performances—such as children’s celebrations for new babies or school-starting parties—recently arrived migrants to Germany can serve as audiences for migrant mothers’ classed performances of “good parenting” and expert status (Feldman-Savelsberg, 2025). When parents refer to self-help literature and advisory textbooks, when they meet on internet forums to receive advice, or when they confess their doubts and fears in peer-to-peer support groups (Fernandes & Lowenkron, 2025), they also perform parenting toward particular kinds of audiences (N’Guessan, 2022). Comparison, including competitive comparison, represents a central feature in the performative making of “good” children and “good parents” (N’Guessan, 2025). Comparison can take a hostile and exclusionary form, as is the case when mothers compete for daily childcare (Fernandes & Lowenkron, 2025), but it can also serve as a consoling and assuring practice, especially when parenting is enacted against the norm (Feldman-Savelsberg, 2025). By cultivating particular “emotion pedagogies” (Wilce & Fenigsen, 2016), parents can eventually even manage to escape the expert gaze. However, as Dinah Hannaford’s paper on expat aid workers in Senegal demonstrates, parents also risk reproducing this subtle form of parenting governmentality (Geinger et al., 2013). As “ever-present spectators to the choices their parents are making, not only in terms of their parenting, but in their broader lifestyles as well” (Hannaford, 2025), children also constitute a significant part of that larger audience, a part that tends to be overlooked in studies on parenting cultures. By embodying and reflecting both intended and unintended lessons (such as implicit racialized hierarchies in expat neighborhoods), children may not only prove parental practice successful but also do so in rather unintended ways, revealing moral contradictions and hypocrisies. Evidently, audiences judging the moral grounds of parenting can weaken parental confidence; in the most unfortunate cases, this can weaken or even rupture the parent-child bond. As Drotbohm shows with her example of Cape Verdean migrating mothers and the children they leave behind in their country of origin, even members of these audiences are at times aware of the fragility of this structurally weakened bond and the ominous power of public shaming (Drotbohm, 2023).

In these performative settings, actor roles can shift. One apparently innocent and particularly revealing setting to consider is the public children’s playground, where the observing parent can become the observed. Being a good parent is negotiated not solely behind closed curtains but often also in public, when requisites such as lunch boxes are evaluated as signs of care (Bundgaard & Olwig, 2018, 211), when media debates frame “helicopter parenting” as either protective, responsible, or overprotective (Bristow, 2014), or when “healthy” family meals (Boni, 2021) are considered teachable, learnable, and perfectible. Parents are often fully aware of not only the omnipresence of these audiences potentially judging or policing their parenting work but also the potentially severe consequences (such as when alerted neighbors, religious specialists, or teachers call upon child welfare services, which might threaten to take “at risk” children into custody; Fay, 2021; Mai & Scheidecker, 2025). Aspirational performances of “good parenting” can also fail or be rejected by the addressed audiences, as Heron demonstrates with his careful analysis of a failing performance of masculine respectability in Dominica. Furthermore, performances of good parenting are crafted against the hegemonic foils of “bad” or failing parents, often linked to classed or racialized discourses. These foils provide additional, invisible audiences of aspirational parental performance. Children are potentially powerful agents in making performances of good parenting “fail.” Examples might be children who reject parental disciplining or corporal punishment (El Ouadani, 2023; Fay, 2021), or who view their parents’ livelihoods critically, as in the case of the expat families discussed by Hannaford (2025). In other cases, the notion of “performance” itself might be misleading—not every parental practice needs to be understood as performance or even interactional. Yet, we suggest that normative parenting is *always* performative, in the sense of bringing about or contesting the state of being “good,” rather than just displaying or mirroring societal norms. The case of the childless mother, presented by Ramos-Zayas in her contribution on Latino mothers in the United States, is particularly insightful in this regard. Participating in the para-parental work of being a mother, caring for (other people’s) children, and knowing how to navigate child-centered nodules of urbanism “manifests” the desired outcome of the self-work of these women (Ramos-Zayas, 2025).

For these reasons, we ultimately suggest considering “the self” to explore how parenting is crafted, adapted, challenged, and changed, especially because normative perceptions of parenting are not necessarily achieved through formal intervention. Instead, it is often in the subtle, competitive, and partly internal boundary work performed by and between parents (Faircloth, 2013; Heimerdinger, 2019), within families (Xu, 2022), within extended and transnational families (Åkesson et al., 2012; Coe, 2013; Feldman-Savelsberg, 2020), in neighborhoods (Bendixsen & Danielsen, 2019), and via critical self-examination (Drotbohm, 2023; Hays, 1996; Strathern, 2005) that parenting is evaluated, judged, adapted, or, as mentioned, interrupted or rejected. This morally heavily loaded contestation of parental practices features a highly self-reflexive dimension that may begin already in the preconception period (Pande, 2021) and ultimately highly impacts even the relationships between adults.

In fact, as Ramos-Zayas’ informative contribution demonstrates (Ramos-Zayas, 2025), because parenting is a political rather than a personal praxis, a parental self does not even necessarily involve having children at all. Whether becoming a mother requires spiritual preparation, whether a particular medical condition is perceived as the mother’s “insufficient” pre-natal self-care, or whether a “failed” early bonding process apparently reduces a child’s ability to establish and maintain stable relationships (Mai & Scheidecker, 2025), the critical examination of one’s own and one’s offspring’s state of being is intrinsic to parenting evaluations of the self. On the flipside of the childless parental self is the present child, who triggers certain behaviors by the caregiver and may either affirm or undermine parenting performance. For example, when the children of expat families in Dakar mirror or comment on the structural inequalities between expat families and local household staff, this can undermine their parent’s self-perception of their own cosmopolitan and anti-racist stance. Thus, the papers by Ramos-Zayas and Hannaford represent two poles along a broad spectrum of how parenting can be considered “performative” in the original sense of the term. Although children may open an array of possibilities for parents’ self-performances, they may simultaneously contest, thwart, or disturb these performances.

With this compilation, our approach also takes into account the fact that parenting is not only contested, but, above all, contested in its gendered nature. Women and men experience parenthood, motherhood, and fatherhood (or childlessness) differently and are also constructed as distinct forms of gendered selves by societies, experts, and audiences. In our special issue, we have therefore included contributions that examine normativities of motherhood (Fernandes and Lowenkron, as well as Ramos-Zayas) and fatherhood (Heron) separately, focusing on the specific gendered dimensions of parenting.

Perhaps surprisingly, absent children—whether undesired, unborn or taken into custody—also apparently represent rather strong performative agents in the making of “good,” “weak,” or even “failing” parents. The implied recognition that “infants grow mothers” (Miller, 1997)—rather than the other way round—introduces concerns about how people situate themselves within or resist moral normative frameworks, whether there is space for individual agency in intersubjective social fields such as parenting, and how parents’ selves manage to negotiate the competing possibilities of “being good” (Mattingly, 2014a; Myers & Yarris, 2019; Zigon & Throop, 2014). In the context of Dominica, where working-class fathers are often portrayed as “missing men,” Heron suggests thinking of the relational selves who articulate such “missing man narratives” as not only vocalizing patriarchal moral anxieties concerning apparently fatherless families (such as the popular “missing-dads-cause-crime narrative” often perpetuated by religious and political commentators) but also by figuring the “missing man” as a foil against which middle-class men present themselves and their understanding of respectability toward the world (Heron, 2025).

Another example illustrating the creative reappropriation of existing normativities by actors within the contemporary paradigm of parenting as a skilled practice appears in N’Guessan’s genealogy of contemporary parental determinism in Côte d’Ivoire. Here, the idea that parental performance and child development are mutually linked is rooted in local imaginaries of self and personhood but also accommodates contemporary neoliberal ideas of aspirational parental subjectivities (N’Guessan, 2025). However, the link between parent and child is complex and multidirectional. A son perceived as “good” may prove his father’s (moral) worthiness, and a beautiful baby can enhance the entire family’s “beauty.” External or structural influences such as poverty, as well as the agency of the child itself—both factors that tend to be downplayed by parental determinism and early child development schemes—also impact perceptions of parental selves. In the context of the global aid regime, Hannaford demonstrates that children can

reflect their parents' deeply embedded racialized and normalized parenting ideologies (Hannaford, 2025). While these challenges are made even more palatable by apolitical framings, for expat parents—whose self-representations are built upon the conviction that they are not just good parents but also “good people” standing on the correct side of global justice—bringing up children in conditions characterized by racialized hierarchies poses a potential moral threat. In critical self-examinations and by exchanging their anxieties with their peers, these parents seek counsel and consciously expose their children to carefully choreographed forms of diversity (Hannaford, 2025).

In her welcomed commentary “Parenting: Affective Economies of Care, Between Being and Becoming,” **Claudia Fonseca** closes the debates raised in this Special Issue with an urgent appeal to see contemporary parenting cultures as historically circumscribed. In doing so, Fonseca suggests that we can avoid propagating—whether through expert intervention, the gaze of critical audiences, or critical self-assessment—its violent and “myopic moralism,” which leaves frustrated and humiliated families struggling to meet the standards of what is a structurally classed and racialized ideal. With this compilation of papers, we intend to underpin Fonseca's claim and offer diverse and critical perspectives on how gendered, racialized, classed, and morally charged inequalities shape not only parenting interventions and policy goals but also the moral and emotional dimensions of parental identity work. By considering various empirical contexts, this Special Issue tackles the “absent presence” that permeates many discussions of contested parenting—a tendency to overlook the entrenched whiteness and class bias that exist within institutional and policy frameworks.

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