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'The Mumpreneur': Intensive Motherhood, Maternal Identity and the Meaning of Educational Work in Singapore

Kristina Göransson

Introduction

> [S]he secures the last Frozen dress in existence while fine-tuning her social media strategy; she plans play dates while navigating through ACRA and MOM jargon;[1] she simultaneously reverse parks, takes a hands-free customer call and placates kids in car seats crying out for snacks 10 minutes before dinner time.
>
> Who is this woman? Who is this amazing creature who manages mum-hood and a business all at once? Why, she's a Mumpreneur! She needs a reward, a medal, an event in her honour (and an overdue leg wax, a day off, and 2 extra hands while we're at it). We can't help with the latter, but as to the reward, well here it is: The Singapore Mumpreneur Awards 2014 are officially open for nominations![2]

1. This ovation is an excerpt from the inaugural Mumpreneur of the Year Award that took place in Singapore in 2014.[3] A 'mumpreneur' is defined as a 'multi-tasking woman who can balance both the stresses of running a business as an entrepreneur and the time-consuming duties of motherhood at the same time.'[4] The notion has become increasingly popular in recent years, as reflected in the aforementioned award as well as other events and social media groups aimed at encouraging women to embrace all these responsibilities. What is not mentioned in the above praise is that many educated women choose to leave their formal employment and start a small-scale business to gain time and flexibility to look after their children. Their primary motivation is to become a 'better' mother.

2. One of my informants, Pauline, decided to give up her career in the financial sector, as her oldest son was about to start primary school. Since Pauline is a keen aficionado of board games, she decided to start an online store selling board games and educational toys for children, an enterprise that would allow her to work from home and have flexible hours. 'That was actually a result of the competitive education system,' Pauline explained. 'We think it is important for the children, so we choose to make this decision and sacrifice and stay home to guide them.' Pauline's husband, a secondary school teacher, fully supports the decision. Although their household income has decreased dramatically, they both agree that this move is in the best interest of their children.

3. During fieldwork I came across many similar stories. Mothers choose to start their own businesses, working part time instead of full time, or simply become homemakers, to better support their children developmentally and academically.[5] In several of these cases the family employs a foreign domestic helper to handle basic household chores, so the mother

can concentrate fully on interacting with and coaching the children. This trend reflects a rearrangement of parenting activities (where economically possible), whereby motherhood increasingly centres on supporting children's academic activities and less on basic caregiving. Brenda Yeoh and Shirlena Huang refer to this reprioritisation of mothering practices as 'discretionary mothering,' whereby 'good mothers' are expected to act as their children's 'key educational agent.'[6] Recent international studies on involved fatherhood have made an important contribution to research on parenting strategies around children's education,[7] but care work remains an effort carried out primarily by mothers.[8] While labour force participation among Singaporean women remains high, statistics show that women are more likely than their male counterparts to (temporarily or permanently) drop out of the formal labour force after marriage and childbirth.[9] The practice of discretionary or selective mothering has grown out of the ever-intensifying emphasis on academic achievement as the primary route to upward social mobility in Singapore as well as in other Asian societies.

4. Singaporean mothers who make such investments and sacrifices tend to describe themselves as 'involved.' As an involved parent they take their children's upbringing, and in particular their education, most seriously. The notion of involved parenting and its consequences for mothers in particular resonates with Sharon Hays' analysis of ideologies of mothering and childrearing in American society.[10] Hays describes the contemporary cultural model of appropriate mothering as one of 'intensive mothering.' Intensive mothering is 'a gendered model that advises mothers to spend a tremendous amount of time, energy, and money in raising children.'[11] As in Singapore, this may seem contradictory given the fact that many American mothers with young children work outside the home. Hays' observations do not, however, make clear just how the selection and prioritisation of mothering activities intersect with notions of human capital, family cultures and intergenerational expectations.

5. Likewise, the abundance of anthropological and sociological studies on women and work-family conflict in developed countries in Asia and globally,[12] do not really tackle the question of how challenges and decisions around those issues relate to parenting strategies regarding pre-college children's education.[13] Basing my arguments on ethnographic research, I will examine how the emphasis on children's development and academic achievement is entangled with a renegotiation and reinterpretation of mothering strategies in everyday life. How do Singapore's middle-class women who have opted out of their formal employment to support their children redefine their roles and responsibilities? How are investments of time, energy, emotional and economic resources in children's education explained, and what bearing do they have on norms and practices of motherhood? How do intensive mothering strategies in Singapore intersect with cultural notions of human capital and intergenerational expectations?

Parental involvement and middle-class identities

6. My theoretical approach is influenced by David Morgan's work on 'doing' family, whereby family is understood to be the result of everyday actions.[14] This approach examines how people resist, accept, or negotiate ideologies and norms of family and parenting in their everyday life. In an elaboration of Hays' notion of intensive mothering, Charlotte Faircloth suggests that intensive parenting styles have to be understood in relation to a shifting perception of children, in which children are seen as vulnerable to all sorts of risks.[15] In this context, 'parents are now understood—by policymakers, parenting experts, and parents themselves—as 'God-like,' and wholly deterministic in an individual child's development and future.'[16] In *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (2003), Annette Lareau outlines different parenting styles and demonstrates how they are shaped by, and reproduce, socio-economic stratification. Lareau's notion, 'concerted cultivation,' is typical of an intensive parenting style; it refers to how middle-class parents try to cultivate their children's talents and skills through adult-organised leisure activities.[17] These investments of time, emotion and money are perceived as fundamental to giving the child a head start in school and secure academic success. While the middle class is not a fixed and homogenous category, educational achievement appears fundamental to the reproduction of middle-class identities around the world.[18] The emphasis on educational achievement, as well as the parents' role in actively supporting their children in this regard, is palpable in Singapore. Schooling begins at a young age and Singapore is frequently among the top-performing countries in international student assessment tests and ranking lists.

7. The ways in which Singaporean middle-class mothers actively define and interpret their roles and responsibilities in the family domain can be theorised in terms of 'identity work,'[19] By engaging in concerted cultivation they shape, reaffirm and present a distinct idea of what constitutes appropriate mothering. But while intensive parenting styles seem to be a global phenomenon, they are nonetheless embedded in specific cultural contexts. Notions of family, childhood, human capital and intergenerational expectations and obligations, as well as social policies, influence how norms of parenting are shaped.[20] For example, research shows that intergenerational relations still play a crucial role in many Asian societies, as both older and younger generations continue to invest in, as well as benefit from, intergenerational expectations and obligations.[21] In Singapore, most adult children are expected to regularly transfer financial and material resources to their elderly parents. These expectations must be understood in relation to limited access to state-funded welfare and the fact that adult children's obligation to support elderly parents is prescribed by law, but also in terms of a specific cultural notion of intergenerational relations, whereby children are expected to eventually reciprocate their parents' care. Such expectations are likely to influence the meaning of the time, emotions, and financial resources parents invest in their children's upbringing and education.

Method and data

8. I have been doing ethnographic research on family and intergenerational relations in Singapore since 2002.[22] My recurrent field visits amount to a period of altogether

nineteen months. The present paper is based on ethnographic data from a six-week-long field visit in 2015, focusing on middle-class mothers' personal experiences of supporting young children in their studies. The data was gathered through in-depth interviews with mothers as well as informal conversations, auto-photography and observations.[23] My recruitment of informants was facilitated by my existing social network and previous fieldwork experience in Singapore. Since I was interested in the experiences of middle-class mothers with young children, informants were identified through a purposive sampling strategy. The sample consists of fourteen mothers with young children. In particular I was interested in mothers who had quit, or were considering quitting, full-time employment to gain more time and flexibility to take care of their children. Among the fourteen mothers interviewed, only one was employed full time. Another mother was employed on a part-time basis, and the remaining twelve were self-employed to varying degrees (and with varying success); some ran more established businesses—one mother had her own cake design business and another ran a private tuition centre—while others took up occasional freelance jobs just to have something to do. The majority of the mothers were in their thirties, while a few were in their late twenties or forties. All had tertiary education. Due to centuries of immigration, Singapore has a multiethnic population that is primarily made up of the Chinese (75%), Malay (14%), and Indian (9%) communities. In addition, there are a number of smaller ethnic groups, including Eurasians, Arabs and Europeans. Ethnic background was not considered, as informants were primarily selected by reference to class, though it should be mentioned that all informants except one, who was Indian, were of Chinese ethnicity.[24]

9. For this study I have chosen to examine intensive mothering primarily from the perspective of the mothers themselves. Personal narratives of this type highlight not only the participants' perceptions and experiences, but also reflect social and historical processes that underlie collective beliefs about, in this case, the meaning of education, parenthood and raising children. The interviewing is ethnographic in the sense that it serves the purpose of capturing how the informants make sense of and ascribe meaning to different experiences, practices, and perceptions in relation to certain specific contexts.[25]

10. Data was also generated through 'auto-photography'—a collaborative approach that gives the researcher access to spaces and situations that otherwise might have been difficult or impossible.[26] Informants were invited to take an active part in the data collection by taking photos that represent their daily parenting activities ahead of being interviewed. The photos were then used as discussion points during the interviews. In addition to these types of ethnographic data, the analysis includes selected material from mainstream media, such as popular magazines and newspapers, where issues relating to childbearing and parenting are frequently discussed. Media resources allow the analysis of so-called naturally occurring data[27] and are useful in illustrating how both professionals and parents articulate their concerns and strategies related to children's development and education. In analysing the empirical data I adopted a thematic and inductive approach, where I mapped frequent concepts and trends but also variations in the data.

'Upgrading' and 'enriching': The quest for a competitive population

11. While emphasis on academic achievement and the resulting parenting strategies around children's education have appeared among the middle-classes in most modern societies, I suggest that the Singaporean example needs to be considered in relation to a widely accepted narrative of national survival and progress. The Singaporean state frequently reminds its subjects of the country's exposed geographical location and (supposed) lack of natural resources, as well as the challenges of increasing competition from other countries in the region. The enhancement of human capital is construed to be the only means whereby Singapore can stay competitive in a globalised world economy.[28] It should be mentioned that parents do not use the term 'human capital' when they talk about raising children, nor do they perceive their sacrifices as a way of supporting the nation. But the government's emphasis on human capital and the rhetoric of national survival are crucial to understanding both the highly competitive education system and the pressure parents experience as they work to help their children to cope and succeed in such a system.

12. The narrative of national survival and progress is particularly pertinent in policies devised to control the size, structure and constitution of the population. The Singapore state has been a rather effective social engineer on this score through its implementation of various policies; still, since the mid-1980s, it has struggled with the task of increasing the birth rate, with no real success. Low birth rates have caused anxiety about population ageing and the presumed costs and pressures such a demographic structure would entail. Driven by a growing 'replacement anxiety,'[29] the government introduced various campaigns, such as the Romancing Singapore campaign, and state-sponsored matchmaking agencies to encourage dating and marriage. The old slogan 'Two is Enough' was scrapped with the announcement of a new one that encourages couples to 'Have Three or More, If You Can Afford It.' The Baby Bonus Scheme, introduced in 2001, awards cash gifts to encourage childbearing; currently it grants SGD8,000 for a first and second child and SGD10,000 for the third and fourth.[30] Paid maternity leave was extended from twelve to sixteen weeks in 2008, and since 2013 new fathers are eligible for one week of government-paid paternity leave.[31] The implicit message is that raising children in a responsible and rational manner costs money, and that only those who can afford it should have three or more. Still, despite three decades of pronatalist policies and incentives, Singapore has one of the lowest fertility rates in the world. In 2013 the total fertility rate (TFR), or average number of live births per woman, hit 1.19, far below the replacement level of 2.1. Narratives of everyday parenting reveal a more complex picture, one in which notions of parenthood, of the meaning of (having) children, and the widespread conviction that childrearing requires substantial investments of time, energy and money all influence decisions about how many children people have. Clearly, falling fertility is related to a renegotiation of intergenerational expectations and parenting practices, where parents spend increasing resources on raising fewer children.

13. From an anthropological perspective it is particularly interesting to look at how ideas of population 'quality' are articulated and constructed locally. In the Singaporean context, population quality is intimately entangled with the notions of upgrading and enrichment. These notions are linked to striving for improved competitiveness, whether on the individual/personal or national levels. The term 'enrichment' is typically used with reference to extra-curricular education and academic skills, for example, supplementary classes in English language or mathematics. The term 'upgrading' occurs frequently in everyday parlance as well as in policy documents. It usually refers to enhancing the population's, and thereby the nation's, competitive edge in the global capitalist economy. An example of this can be found in the recently endorsed White Paper on Population, 'A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore.'[32] This white paper is a roadmap for how Singapore should overcome the challenge of declining birth rates and population ageing. It proposes further stimulus to encourage family formation as well as selective immigration to compensate for the low fertility rate. In addition to support for conception and delivery costs, and measures to help parents balance work and family commitments, the white paper recommends 'more sharing responsibilities between husband and wife, and support from grandparents to nurture [the] children.'[33] Moreover, the white paper maintains that the advancement of human capital (that is the people) is directly linked to the advancement of Singapore's economy and its chances of staying globally competitive. The term upgrade/upgrading appears frequently in the seventy-eight-page document with regard to improving citizens' skills, as well as improving infrastructure and the living environment. It states that Singaporeans need to see upgrading as a life-long effort, necessary to remaining competitive in the labour market, and that Singapore as a nation is dependent on a top-notch workforce. As we shall see below, the idea of upgrading as fundamental to progress and success has trickled down and is indeed reproduced in middle-class parenting strategies that focus on children's development and academic achievement.

The story of a mumpreneur – enabling intensive mothering

14. The reasons behind the decision to quit a full-time job when the children are young certainly vary, but the most common explanation among my informants was the need to invest time, energy and emotion in raising their children. For most families, the loss of one income requires adjustments and reprioritisations. Pauline, the mumpreneur who runs an online board game store, elaborated on how she and her husband adjusted their living expenses and how they reason around the prioritisations they make. They are no longer travelling abroad for vacations and have stopped shopping as a form of entertainment. Like so many other middle-class families, they employ a foreign domestic helper to do the housework. Employing a domestic helper, usually from Indonesia or the Philippines, is relatively affordable in Singapore thanks to the Foreign Maids Scheme, which was introduced in 1978 to make it easier for Singaporean women to enter the labour market by freeing them from some of their domestic responsibilities. As pointed out by, among others, Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild, domestic labour carried out by migrant women reproduces and reaffirms existing global inequalities.[34] For the purposes of this paper I

am mainly interested in how responsibilities within the domestic domain, including familial responsibilities, are stratified. Chores such as washing children's clothes or cooking meals are the kind of care activities parents often delegate to others, whereas supervising homework and planning leisure activities appear to be central (middle-class) parenting activities.

Intensive mothering as identity work

15. A noticeable pattern in my ethnographic material shows that while domestic and familial obligations remain a female responsibility, certain obligations are perceived as more important or demanding. Children's development and education is the most obvious example. None of the parents I interviewed would delegate overseeing the children's homework to a domestic helper, since she is seen as incapable of doing that kind of work. Nor are grandparents usually trusted to support their grandchildren developmentally or academically, although they are often engaged to do basic child-minding. When Pauline and Jason gave birth to their oldest son, they had to turn to Jason's parents for help because Pauline's mother was already taking care of other grandchildren. When the twins were born a couple of years later, Jason's parents moved in with Pauline and Jason to help out on a daily basis. This kind of extended household is still fairly common in Singapore, either as a temporary or permanent arrangement. The lack of affordable childcare options is one explanation, but the notion of filial piety and the expected obligation that old parents should live with one of their children also plays a part.[35] However, this form of intergenerational obligation is increasingly renegotiated, with co-residence and practical support tending to be replaced with financial and material support. [36]

16. When Pauline returned to work after the birth of the twins, she and Jason decided to enrol their oldest son in childcare because they worried that he would be neglected at home where his grandmother would be fully occupied taking care of the twins. The twins also went to childcare when they turned eighteen months, because Pauline and Jason felt the childcare centre could do a better job than the grandmother. The expertise-based approach typical of intensive mothering, where grandparents are not considered up-to-date enough, implies a severing of the usual flow of authority between generations. Pauline explained that she did not agree with some of her mother-in-law's methods, such as letting the children watch TV while eating just to get them to eat. By now, the oldest son is in primary school from 7 a.m. to 2 p.m., while the twins are in full-time childcare. The childcare fees represent Pauline and Jason's biggest monthly expense. Without government subsidies, their monthly childcare fee is about SGD1,200[37] per child, with subsidies it is about SGD700 per child. The oldest son does not attend afterschool care. Pauline describes the twins' childcare centre as a midrange facility. When Pauline quit her job they applied to cheaper centres. The queue was long, but eventually they were a granted a place for the twins. After visiting the centre, however, Pauline was not happy: It was dark and had no air-conditioning. So they decided to keep the twins at their current centre, despite the high cost. 'It is a matter of priorities,' Pauline maintains.

17. For Pauline, *time* is important. She thinks parents should spend time with their children, rather than spending money on them. Currently Pauline does not earn a salary from her online board game business. The money that flows in has to be used to ensure an adequate stock of games. She also points out that they are now entitled to some government subsidies because their household income has fallen below a certain limit. She is very aware that if her business was to generate a lot more income they would lose the subsidy. Moreover she does not want her business to expand to the point where it takes more time and energy than she initially planned. This potential dilemma surfaced in several interviews; if the reason to become an entrepreneur was to get more family time, the size (and hence usually the success) of the business had to be limited. Pauline hopes that by the time the children are in secondary school and more independent she can let her business expand.

18. Pauline is member of a network for mumpreneurs. Most of the members run online businesses, which can get rather lonely, Pauline explained. The network functions as a support group, where mumpreneurs can exchange practical tips and support each other. Certainly many women and mothers identify as just entrepreneurs, and not mumpreneurs, but the obvious fact that there is no such term as 'dadpreneur' is revealing. Fathers who are entrepreneurs are just entrepreneurs, and Singaporean fathers rarely quit their jobs or cut their work time to become better fathers. In addition to the stereotype of the male breadwinner and perceptions of women as more nurturing, my informants mentioned earning power as an important reason why the mother, and not the father, is the one who compromises her professional career. In the case of Pauline and Jason, earning power was not a major factor since they earned almost equal incomes. Pauline's explanation for quitting her job was that she saw an opportunity to turn a hobby (board games) into a business, while freeing up time for her children. Regardless of the reasons and compromises, Pauline perceives the time with and for her children, and the emotional and mental presence it entails, as crucial to her identity as a mother.

The mumpreneur: A dual undertaking

19. My other informants shared Pauline's ideas about the time spent being emotionally and mentally present for their children as the most important aspects of being a mother. Susan, a mother of three daughters aged 5, 9, and 12, decided to quit her accountant job when her first child was born. Her husband is a naval officer with an income high enough to comfortably sustain the family. For a few years Susan did not work in the paid workforce at all but then she felt that she wanted to take up part-time employment, so she began working as a private tutor. Eventually she got bored with the tutoring job and decided to do what Pauline did, turn a hobby into a business. Baking has always been a passion with Susan, hence, eight years ago, she decided to design and bake cakes for special occasions. The business does not generate a high income, but it makes a decent contribution to the household, Susan said. While they do not need the income from her business, Susan emphasises that she is no *Tai Tai*; she likes 'to use her brains for

something,' (*Tai Tai* is the colloquial term for a wealthy housewife who, unlike the mumpreneur, does not work, nor does she aspire to work.) Susan's stance that she likes to use her brains and do something meaningful was common among the women I interviewed. It reflects these women's identity as well educated and *capable* of having a professional career (even if that career is on hold for the sake of the children). Becoming a mumpreneur is very much a dual undertaking: on one hand it means that a mother takes her children's upbringing and development seriously and devotes sufficient time and energy to it; on the other hand, she remains committed to doing some kind of meaningful work and does not give up her professional identity altogether.

20. Rachel, another informant, related a similar experience. She quit her job in the corporate world before she gave birth to her son, because she knew that once she became a mother she would want to be at home. At the same time, she was tired of her job and felt that she wanted to do work she really loves: writing. However, once her son was born, she had difficulty continue her freelancing, so she began looking for other ways of working from home. She tried out different things, such as telemarketing and online business, but she claimed those did not allow her to do 'meaningful work.' Eventually she turned to coaching. Rachel now works as a freelance life coach who inspires and coaches other women who are at a crossroad and need help to figure out which direction to take. Most of these are at a point where they are considering whether to start a business. Until recently she targeted mothers (aspiring mumpreneurs), but she has now broadened her business to coaching women in general. 'Because I found that it was a little bit challenging when I was trying to work with mums…many of them would say "I want to have a change, I want to start a business."' But a lot of the time they would use the kids as an excuse for not committing or doing what had been agreed. Rachel feels that many of the mothers are not sure what they want to do. She points out that there are different types of mumpreneurs. Some may be primarily entrepreneurs and very devoted to their business, and perhaps even dependent on generating an income from the business, whereas other mumpreneurs are not so driven and might just want to have something meaningful to do in addition to taking care of the children. This creates a common dilemma for aspiring mumpreneurs. On one hand they start a business to have more flexibility and time for the children, on the other hand, starting a business is time consuming and requires much work. Rachel herself belongs to the devoted category. She and her husband have enrolled their son in full-time childcare to allow her to focus on her business during the day, and in addition she works a lot in the evenings. If needed, however, she can regulate her workload by not taking on new clients or by raising her fees. Rachel's son is five years old and will soon start primary school. Rachel feels a bit of pressure about preparing him for that step. 'Is he going to be adequately prepared? Because it is going to be a big jump, it is going be a huge difference [in primary school],' she said. Like so many parents, Rachel realises that she will probably need to invest more time and energy in her son's education in the coming years. Although Rachel stresses that she does not believe in the necessity of a degree, because there are many ways to make a living, she and her husband feel that reading and writing are fundamental skills needed to succeed in school. For that reason, their son attends

extracurricular language enrichment activities every Saturday.

'If we are not *kiasu* parents, our kids are going to suffer'

21. Like Rachel's son, most middle-class children in Singapore are enrolled in various types of after-school activities, such as supplementary academic classes, music, sports, drama and so forth. Regardless of the activity, there is a widespread idea that it should be useful for the child's development. Even informal hobbies are often justified in terms of their usefulness. Pauline often emphasised the developmental benefits of board games during our conversations. Developmental benefit is likewise a salient feature of her marketing strategy, according to which playing board games are not only fun, but also educational. Children develop their ability to strategise and be attentive without realising it. Another example of a common activity with such 'dual gains' is drama class, which aims at improving children's language skills. These are examples of attempts to develop children's talents in a structured way through leisure activities, or what Lareau terms 'concerted cultivation.'[38] Concerted cultivation assumes that parents have an important role to play in planning and organising their children's leisure activities, and they need to be well informed to do so. Parenting strategies concerning both the formal education system (e.g., how best to prepare a child for an examination or which school to apply for), as well as after-school activities (such as how to select the best enrichment classes or private tuition centres) are hot topics. What might seem like an exaggerated concern with equipping children for the future has to be understood in relation to the demanding education system.

22. Singapore's education system begins ability-based streaming at a young age. To prepare the child for the demands of the education system, most parents invest substantial resources in supplementary training. This trend can be seen even among preschool children, since it is increasingly common to enrol toddlers in enrichment classes, such as mathematics, Chinese language or science. According to the latest Household Expenditure Survey, Singaporean families spend 1.1 billion Singapore dollars per year on educational services—almost twice as much as a decade ago—and the number of centres that provide such classes grows steadily. Moreover, there are now classes aimed at parents, too: several centres organise workshops and classes for parents who want to learn how to better understand and help their children with their studies.[39] These workshops teach methods for solving, for example, mathematic problems, as well as strategies for coping with children's anxieties during exam periods. One of my informants, Nicole, mentioned that she had attended a workshop to understand the kinds of mathematic problems her children were assigned in school, because today's mathematics are very different from 'the old days.' The workshops mentioned here are run by private tuition centres, but the government, too, has introduced initiatives to encourage parents to play an active role in their children's education (see below).

The moral imperative to perform educational work

23. The widespread image of the involved parent as a rational consumer in education masks both the emotional and moral aspects of educational care work and the fact that parental involvement is highly gendered, since this work is generally carried out by mothers.[40] As illustrated throughout this paper, the planning and organising of children's academic activities, from regular homework to extracurricular training, is a responsibility that usually falls on mothers. The emotional engagement in their children's schooling is tangible in the ethnographic data I have collected. Aditi, who runs a private training centre, expressed great anxiety about the national Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) that is held at the end of primary 6. Students' PSLE results determine their choice of secondary schools and stream them into Express, Normal (Academic) or Normal (Technical) coursework. While the Ministry of Education states that the different 'streams' are 'designed to match [the students'] learning abilities and interests,'[41] there is widespread conviction among parents and students that to be streamed into any of the Normal courses represents failure and will thwart the possibility of a student entering tertiary education. Aditi's son is only in primary 4 and even though he will not sit for the PSLE for another two years, Aditi is worried. When I said goodbye to Aditi and wished her good luck with her son's PSLE, her reply was, 'If I survive [the PSLE]!' The anxiety around children's performance in school does not mean that parents by default are against the ability-based streaming system. Nicole, whom I quoted earlier, maintains that the streaming system is good because she has noticed that her son, who was admitted into the Gifted Education Program,[42] learns more when he is in a more competitive group.

24. As mentioned in the introduction, intensive parenting styles are entwined with a perception of children as vulnerable to risks.[43] Responsible parenting, or in this case mothering, is aimed at eliminating those risks by making sure the child is adequately prepared for the challenges he or she might face. Attending after-school enrichment programs and getting admitted into a preferred school are examples of how parents seek to eliminate risks. There is a predominant assumption that children need to acquire academic skills long before starting primary school, and that they need to do so in a systematised way. The increasing number of supplementary training centres in Singapore fuels this assumption. The director of one such centre, Colourful Hearts, asserted that,

> Early learning targets at [*sic*] a child during his formative years. During this crucial period, any deficits (termed 'learning gaps' at Colourful Hearts) that may arise are identified and addressed. If left unattended during these formative years, they can and will debilitate the child's progress and abilities in school and later life. For this reason, we find early enrichment crucial.[44]

This reasoning implies that the chances of staying competitive in school and future professional life are directly dependent on addressing possible 'learning gaps' in early childhood. While it might be a logical statement from someone who is the director of a private learning centre, parents' fears that their children will fall behind in school as a result of such gaps loom large. Not only do they worry that their children will be at a disadvantage, they also worry that failure to perform will have a lifelong negative impact on a child's self-confidence.

25. The local expression *kiasu* is sometimes used with reference to parents' exaggerated concern with their children's performance. *Kiasu* is a Hokkien term meaning 'fear of losing out.' Parents may call themselves, or others, *kiasu* when they enrol their children in enrichment classes with the hope of increasing their chances of success in school. *Kiasu* is normally not a flattering attribute but with regard to parenting, some take pride in being *kiasu* because it means they strive to provide the best for their child. In the words of Pauline, 'If we are not *kiasu* parents, our kids are going to suffer.' The engagement with children's education is thus seen as a moral responsibility.

26. The principal of another training centre in Singapore stresses the importance of such parental engagement; parents should research the vast number of extracurricular programs available and make informed decisions based on what the child needs:

> Parents should consider attending baby or toddler programmes as a form of enrichment for their child. They should enrol their child in such classes in the spirit of wanting to give the best to their child, rather than being 'kiasu' or getting pulled into the 'rat race'.... Furthermore, research indicates that early formal or informal learning exposure has immense value in a child's development during the crucial window period where young children are most curious, teachable and impressionable.[45]

The importance of parental involvement in education was recently stressed by Singapore's Ministry of Education, which has introduced new initiatives to strengthen the partnership between schools and parents.[46] Parents will receive an activity book to help them handle their children's transition from preschool to primary school, while schools and teachers get guidelines and tips on how to engage and communicate with parents. To help parents and their children to make 'informed education and career choices,' there will be an Education and Career Guidance handbook for parents with children in upper primary and lower secondary school. There are similar initiatives aimed at parents with preschool children. For instance, to help parents identify 'good quality preschools,' the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA) will evaluate preschool education programmes to 'distinguish centres with strong teaching and learning practices.'[47]

27. The generally accepted idea that parents have an imperative role in supporting their children's educational development is part of 'a *dominant set of cultural repertoires* about how children should be raised.'[48] Such cultural repertoires are shaped and reproduced by professionals and experts on childrearing, as well as parents themselves. The importance of being an involved mother and making informed decisions about children's formal or informal schooling is present throughout my ethnographic material. Not only do the mothers I interviewed spend lots of time on researching and evaluating available schools and training centres, they also read up on child development, exchange tips with other parents, and inform themselves about different strategies to gain admission to preferred schools.[49] The latter is a task that they plan out far ahead of time. Children are admitted into primary school based on a number of criteria, such as sibling priority and children whose parents studied in the school and who are members of the alumni association.[50] If the school is oversubscribed in a specific period, which often happens in the most popular primary

schools, the school usually conducts a ballot (lottery) for the remaining vacancies. My informants describe the ballot as an extremely stressful event, where parents whose children do not get a vacancy sometimes break down in tears. Clearly, parental education work is not limited to supervising children's homework or paying for private tuition, it is also about investing time, effort and emotion in getting into the right school or selecting the most successful enrichment programme.

Intergenerational expectations

28. While intensive parenting styles are typical of middle-class families around the world, parenting practices are shaped by different family cultures and social contexts. Previous studies show that intergenerational relations play a crucial role and the idea that children should reciprocate their parents' care in future remains strong in Singapore.[51] However, the actual performance of this expectation is under renegotiation. Whereas most young Singaporeans, including the women interviewed in the current study, provide financial support to their own parents (regardless of whether the parents *need* the support or not), they usually claim that they do not expect to rely on their children when they get old. Still, they maintain they would expect 'tokens' of reciprocity. Pauline, for example, hopes that her children will uphold the principle of filial piety. 'Of course I hope they will remember where the water comes from, you know.… So I hope that if they are doing well they will remember [their] parents, that we are the ones who helped them on their way.' While Pauline and her husband hope to have enough savings for their retirement, they would like their children to 'give them something as a bonus.' Pauline continued, 'Generally our generation will say "We don't expect [our children] to support us in the future."… But if the need should arise we definitely hope that they will support us.'

29. Reciprocal acts may or may not be manifested in material terms, such as regular monetary contributions once the adult child has entered the labour market, or in symbolic terms, such as a child's success in academic and professional life. Rachel, the freelance life coach, described parents' investments in a child's upbringing as a cultural expectation, not just a feature of contemporary society: 'I also think it has to do with family honour, like, if your kid goes to university or excels in their studies [the family will gain prestige].' In other words, the prestige represents a symbolic return. Whether reciprocal acts are manifested in material or symbolic terms, the return represents an acknowledgement of the efforts the parents make to support the child. Yet, the absence of extensive public welfare, the high cost of living, and the fact that adult children's obligations to support old family members who cannot support themselves is prescribed by law may in fact compel them to rely on their children.

Conclusion

30. In this paper I have explored the ways in which Singaporean middle-class mothers actively define their roles and responsibility in terms of children's development and educational

achievement. While educational achievement and intensive parenting styles appear fundamental to the reproduction of middle-class identities around the world, the pressure Singaporean middle-class mothers experience as they work to help their children succeed in school is embedded in a specific cultural context. In Singapore, the widely accepted narrative of national survival, and the importance ascribed to human capital, permeates the education system. Singapore's education system is highly competitive and places at university are at a premium. The Ministry of Education, as well as private tuition centres, make a strong point of the importance of parental involvement in education. In such a competitive system, there is an incentive for mothers to 'go the extra mile' for their children. This is different in countries (such as Scandinavian ones, for example) where the need for 'concerted cultivation' on the part of parents is reduced.

31. In line with other studies on intensive mothering, the ethnographic data here bears witness to a widespread notion of appropriate childrearing as 'child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive.'[52] Feminist researchers have convincingly argued that there is an oppressive side to parental involvement, since it is an effort carried out primarily by mothers.[53] Likewise, the assumption that parents are compelled to invest substantial resources and time to support their children's development and education reaffirms existing social inequalities and decreases intergenerational social mobility.[54] In this paper I illustrate that Singaporean middle-class mothers who have opted out of the formal labour market to become 'mumpreneurs,' homemakers, or part time workers are motivated to do so in order to become better mothers. While they certainly compromise their income and professional careers, the ethnographic data points to women actively reinterpreting their family responsibilities and roles in their children's development and education as a career project in itself.[55] Singapore's competitive formal education system, thriving private tutoring industry, and the widespread conviction that parental involvement is fundamental to securing top grades in school amplifies parents', and in particular mothers', concerns with their children's academic progress. Certainly, the possibility of making free time to spend with one's children is a matter of financial capacity; all my informants had husbands earning an income high enough to support the family. In this regard, fathers' involvement is primarily about enabling the mother to quit her full-time employment for the sake of the children. The mothers interviewed for this study additionally shared an aspiration to continue doing something meaningful in addition to care work. The decision to become a 'mumpreneur' may be interpreted as an example of how middle-class mothers construct an alternative professional identity, while seeking more time and flexibility to care for their children.

32. The meaning of parental involvement among Singaporean middle-class mothers is embedded in intergenerational expectations and obligations, whereby the reciprocal relationship between parents and children is reaffirmed, albeit reinterpreted. It is clear that young parents today have less explicit expectations that they will receiving material or financial support (or return) from their own children in the future, but the expectation of symbolic return ('tokens of appreciation') remains strong. This cultural logic, whereby the

parent-child relation is manifested and reaffirmed through acts of 'investment and return,' not only emphasises children's future responsibilities to parents, it also underlies the parental obligation to actively support children's chances of succeeding. In this way, the ideology of parental involvement is incorporated in, and indeed enhanced by, an existing logic of intergenerational obligations.

33. The ethnographic data also demonstrates a stratification of mothering activities, whereby maternal identity increasingly centres on supporting children in their studies, while 'less important' care work, such as cooking or basic child-minding, may be delegated to domestic helpers or grandparents. This, in turn, reflects how the 'widespread "scientisation" of parenting is not confined to expert literature or policy recommendations: rather, it is interpreted, internalized, and mobilized by individuals and networks in the course of "identity work".'[56] I have mentioned that the expertise-based approach typical of intensive mothering, where grandparents' ways of raising children are considered obsolete, challenges the traditional flow of authority between generations. An interesting question for future research in the field is to what extent the weakening authority of the older generation may impact on intergenerational dynamics, and ultimately the flow of resources between generations.

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Notes

[1] Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority (ACRA) is the national regulator of business entities in Singapore. MOM stands for Ministry of Manpower.

[2] Singapore Mumpreneur Awards (accessed 15 February 2016).

[3] The Singapore Mumpreneur Awards is organised by Mums@Work, a social enterprise that supports women to find a balance between being a mother and working.

[4] Singapore Mumpreneur Awards.

[5] See also Ah Eng Lai and Shirlena Huang, 'The other chief executive officer: Homemaking as a sequencing strategy and career project among married Chinese women in Singapore,' in *Old Challenges, New Strategies: Women, Work, and Family in Contemporary Asia*, ed. L.L. Thang and W-H. Yu, pp. 87–116, Boston: Brill, 2004.

[6] Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Shirlena Huang, 'Mothers on the move: Children's education and transnational mobility in global-city Singapore,' in *The Globalization of Motherhood: Deconstructions and Reconstructions of Biology and Care*, ed. JaneMaree Maher and Wendy Chavkin,pp. 31–52, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 32.

[7] Lucas Gottzén, 'Involved fatherhood? Exploring the educational work of middle-class men,' *Gender and Education* 23(5) (2011): 619–34.

[8] Maeve O'Brien, 'Mothers' emotional care work in education and its moral imperative,' *Gender and Education* 19(2) (2007): 159–77; Diane Reay, *Class Work: Mothers' Involvement in Their Children's Primary Schooling*, London: University of London Press, 1998; 'A useful extension of Bourdieu's conceptual framework? Emotional capital as a way of understanding mothers'

involvement in their children's education,' *Sociological Review* 48 (2000): 568–85.

[9] While the overall female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) increased from 54.3% in 2006 to 60.4% in 2015, the rate still trends downwards for women aged 30 and over. The female LFPR peaks for women aged 25 to 29 (89.7% in 2015), and decreases steadily thereafter (83.9% for those aged 30 to 35, and 78.9% for those aged 36 to 40). See 'Report: Labour Force in Singapore 2015,' Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, 2016 (accessed 2 February 2016), pp. 3–4.

[10] Sharon Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood,* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996.

[11] Hays, *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, p. x.

[12] For example, Theresa W. Devasahayam and Brenda S.A. Yeoh (eds), *Working and Mothering in Asia: Images, Ideologies and Identities*, Singapore: NUS Press, 2007; Arlie Russell Hochschild, *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997; Leng Leng Thang and Wei-Hsin Yu, *Old Challenges, New Strategies: Women, Work, and Family in Contemporary Asia*, Social sciences in Asia, Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2004; Joan C. Williams, *Unbending Gender: Why Family and Work Conflict and What To Do About It*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000; Wei-Hsin Yu, 'Gender, family, and forms of labour force participation: Women and non-standard employment in Japan and Taiwan,' in *Old Challenges, New Strategies*, ed. Thang and Yu, pp. 29–59, Boston: Brill, 2004; *Gendered Trajectories: Women, Work, and Social Change in Japan and Taiwan*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009.

[13] Yeoh and Huang, 'Mothers on the move'; Yoonhee Kang, 'Singlish or Globish: Multiple language ideologies and global identities among Korean educational migrants in Singapore,' *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 16(2) (2012): 165–83; '"Any one parent will do": Negotiations of fatherhood among South Korean "wild geese" fathers in Singapore,' *Journal of Korean Studies* 17(2) (2012): 269–98; Nancy Abelmann and Jiyeon Kang, 'Defending South Korean education migration mothers and humanizing global children: Memoir/manuals of pre-college study abroad,' *Global Networks: A Journal of Transnational Affairs* 14(1) (2013): 1–22.

[14] David H.J. Morgan, *Family Connections: An Introduction to Family Studies*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996; *Rethinking Family Practices*, Basingstoke: Palgrave: Macmillan, 2011.

[15] Charlotte Faircloth, 'Intensive parenting and the expansion of parenting,' *Parenting Culture Studies* (2014): 25–50 (accessed 31 August 2015).

[16] Faircloth, 'Intensive parenting,' p. 26.

[17] The opposite of concerted cultivation is the natural growth approach, a parenting style found more frequently among working-class families. This parenting style is characterised by a clear boundary between adults and children and the absence of adult-organised leisure acitivities. See Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, p. 3.

[18] Cf. Rachel Heiman, Mark Liechty and Carla Freeman, 'Introduction: Charting an anthropology of the middle classes,' in *The Global Middle Classes: Theorizing Through Ethnography*, ed. Rachel Heiman, Carla Freeman and Mark Liechty, pp. 3–29, Santa Fe: SAR Press, 2012; Roxana Waterson and Depak Kumar Behera, 'Introduction: Extending ethnographic research with children in the Asia-Pacific region,' *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 12(5) (2011): 411–25; Cindi C. Katz, 'Childhood as spectacle: Relays of anxiety and the reconfiguration of the child,' *Cultural Geographies* 15(1) (2008): 5–17.

[19] Faircloth, 'Intensive parenting.'

[20] Cf. Margaret Mead and Martha Wolfenstein (eds), *Childhood in Contemporary Cultures*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955; Charlotte Faircloth, Diane M. Hoffman and Linda L. Layne (eds), *Parenting in Global Perspective: Negotiating Ideologies of Kinship, Self and Politics*, London: Routledge, 2013.

[21] Elisabeth Croll, 'The intergenerational contract in the changing Asian family,' *Oxford Development Studies* 34(4) (2006): 473–91; Elspeth Graham, Peggy Teo, Brenda S.A. Yeoh and Susan Levy, 'Reproducing the Asian family across the generations: 'Tradition', gender and expectations in Singapore,' *Asia-Pacific Population Journal* 17(2) (2002): 61–86; Kristina Göransson, *The Binding Tie: Chinese Intergenerational Relations in Modern Singapore*, Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2009; Misa Izuhara, 'Negotiating family support? The 'generational contract' between long-term care and inheritance,' *Journal of Social Policy* 33(4) (2004): 649–65; John E. Knodel, Jed Friedman, Truong Si Anh and Bui The Cuong, 'Intergenerational exchanges in Vietnam: Family size, sex composition, and the location of children,' *Population Studies* 54(1)(2000): 89–104; Kalyani Mehta and Leng Leng Thang, 'Interdependence in Asian families: The Singapore case,' *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships* 4(1) (2006): 117–25.

[22] Singapore is an island city-state located south of peninsular Malaysia. Singapore was a British colony between 1819 and 1963. Following a brief union with Malaysia (1963–1965), Singapore became independent in 1965. Today it is one of the most trade-intensive economies in the world and the wealthiest country in Southeast Asia.

[23] Most interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the respondents.The transcriptions of recorded interviews have been slightly edited for readability. Individuals who agreed to participate were informed of the purpose of the study and guaranteed anonymity. All names used here are fictitious.

[24] Due to the limited sample and the fact that the research question addresses mothering practices in terms of class rather than ethnic identity, it is not possible to discern any differences between the mothers of Chinese ethnicity and the mother of Indian ethnicity.

[25] James Spradley, *The Ethnographic Interview*, New York: Holt, 1979.

[26] See Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnography*, London: Sage, 2001.

[27] David Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analysing Talk, Text and Interaction* (3rd edition), London: Sage, 2006.

[28] Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skribš, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008.

[29] Milena Marchesi, 'Reproducing Italians: Contested biopolitics in the age of "replacement anxiety",' *Anthropology & Medicine* 19(2) (2012): 171–88.

[30] 'The Baby Bonus Scheme,' Ministry of Social and Family Development, Singapore, 2015 (accessed 10 September 2015).

[31] 'Paternity Leave,' Ministry of Manpower, Singapore, 2015 (accessed 10 September 2015).

[32] White Paper on Population, Singapore, 2013 (accessed 14 August 2016).

[33] White Paper on Population, p. 20.

[34] Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild (eds), *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy*, New York: Metropolitan Books; London : Granta Books, 2003.

[35] At least among Chinese Singaporeans, the responsibility of taking care of old parents traditionally fell on the son/s, but in recent decades this gendered expectations has been renegotiatiated as old parents increasingly choose to reside with daughters.

[36] Göransson, *The Binding Tie*.

[37] 1 Singapore dollar equals 0.7 US dollar (as of 12 October 2015).

[38] Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*.

[39] Linette Heng, 'Parents go for tuition to help their kids,' *The New Paper*, 8 January 2015 (accessed 21 January 2015).

[40] O'Brien, 'Mothers' emotional care work.'

[41] 'Secondary Education,' Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2015 (accessed 11 September 2015).

[42] About 1% of primary 4 pupils are admitted into the Gifted Education Program. The pupils are given an enriched curriculum that is designed to challge them, per the 2015 report from the 'Gifted Education Programme: Frequently asked questions,' Ministry of Education (accessed 14 August 2016).

[43] Faircloth, 'Intensive parenting.'

[44] Quoted in Mandy Lim, 'Do babies and toddlers really need enrichment classes?' *Singapore Motherhood*, 11 June 2012 (accessed 23 September 2015).

[45] Lim, 'Do babies and toddlers really need enrichment.'

[46] 'Schools, parents and the community to partner in bringing out the best in every student,' Ministry of Education, Singapore, press release, 22 September 2015 (accessed 7 October 2015).

[47] Early Childhood Development Agency, Singapore, September 2014 (accessed 1 February 2016).

[48] Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*, p 4.

[49] The majority of Singapore's primary schools are public, so-called government schools, or government-aided autonomous schools. These schools do not have any school fees for Singaporean citizens, only a minor miscellanous fee (currently at SGD6.50 per month). In addition there are a smaller number of independent schools, which do not receive any government funding and hence have higher fees.

[50] In the first phase, children who have older siblings registered at the school of choice are admitted. In the second phase, children whose parents studied in the school and who are members of the alumni association are given priority, and thereafter children whose parents studied in the school but are not members of the alumni association. Next, children whose parents have joined the school as volunteers and conducted voluntary service are admitted. Joining an alumni association or volunteering is a common strategy to boost the chances of getting admitted into the preferred primary school, but there is no guarantee that these efforts will pay off since the registration process is dependent on the number of applicants. See 'Registration Phases and Procedures,' Ministry of Education, Singapore, 2015 (accessed 23 September 2015).

[51] Graham et al., 'Reproducing the Asian family'; Göransson, *The Binding Tie*; Mehta and Thang, 'Interdependence in Asian families.'

[52] Hays, *Cultural Contraditions*, p. x.

[53] E.g., O'Brien, 'Mothers' emotional care work'; Reay, *Class Work*; 'A useful extension of Bourdieu's conceptual framework?'

[54] Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods*.

[55] Lai and Huang, 'The other chief executive officer.'

[56] Charlotte Faircloth, 'What Science says is best: Parenting practices, scientific authority and maternal identity,' *Sociological Research Online* 4 (2010), para. 5.1 (accessed 15 February 2016).

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