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(Re)configuring moral boundaries of intergenerational justice: the UK parent-led climate movement

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ABSTRACT

The interests of children in a climate-challenged future are under-represented within UK policy-making and public discourse. Debates on intergenerational equity have centred on economic logic rather than the moral issue of harms to the next generation, or the responsibilities of today's generation. Civil movements play an important role in changing public and political thinking on this issue; however, research on intergenerational climate justice activism has so far been confined to the youth movement. This study uses an in-depth diary and interview dataset of 20 UK-based activist mothers and fathers to explore the emotional spaces of parenting and campaigning for intergenerational climate justice. Attention was paid to the role of parenthood in the framing and motivation for action, and the way that campaigning was sustained or impeded by activist parents' personal relationships. The study found that the emotional spaces of activist parenting were managed and demarcated through moral boundary work that was used to define, distinguish and legitimise a collective representation. These boundaries were relational and drawn selectively to include similar others and to form bridges with politicians; boundaries also functioned to delegitimise the role of adults without children, and to exclude and excuse younger children and older relatives from playing a part in justice activism. The paper concludes by considering how these processes might impede the movement and have implications for wider social justice.

Introduction

The burdens and benefits of environmental and ecological exploitation unfold across time, spanning generations (Page 1999). The principle of intergenerational justice, as a key moral concern in the issue of climate change, requires the present generation to "assume duties and responsibilities toward later generations" (Davies, Tabucanon, and Box 2016, 418); however so far, the concept of intergenerational justice has largely been confined to rationalist economic and philosophical theorising on the intertemporal distribution of resources, social discounting and the non-identifiable entity of "generations", and often framed in the legal language of human rights (Nguyen 2020). The notion of responsibilities to future generations is under-represented within both the UK's current political structures and the public sphere (Jones, O'Brien, and Ryan 2018; Graham and de Bell 2020). Formal structures aiming to represent the interests of future generations have been subject to the short-termism of election cycles and a lack of

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public support and legitimacy (Jones, O'Brien, and Ryan 2018). The role of civil society movements has been identified as important in initiating discourse about intergenerational equity and for garnering public support for the implementation of long-term thinking in cross-party policy-making (Jones, O'Brien, and Ryan 2018).

The recent emergence of grassroots youth climate activism has gone some way in introducing intergenerational justice to the politics of climate change in the UK. Striking to demand more rapid action on climate change, children and young people have deployed powerfully moral narratives of intergenerational inequality and a stolen future. While scholarship on youth climate activism is growing, there is currently little research on the important role that parents play in intergenerational justice. Parents are in a key position to advocate for children's climate justice through their emotionally and practically supportive roles for children's civic engagement (Sanson, Burke, and Van Hoorn 2018), as well as expressing solidarity through attending youth strikes with their children and voicing feelings about generationally unfair burdens of inaction on climate change (Martiskainen et al. 2020). The past couple of years have seen an emergence of grassroots climate activism in the UK that is specifically parent-led. The parent movement has foregrounded the parent and family identity in representations of intergenerational climate justice, forming groups in the UK such as Mothers Rise Up, Parents for Future, Eco Action Families and Extinction Rebellion Families. There are also environmentalist parents who are not part of a distinctly parental group but are nonetheless motivated to engage in various forms of climate campaigning primarily out of concern for their children's safety.

The parent movement has the potential to forge a new moral argument into public discourse on climate change, one that advances longer-term thinking and an ethic of intergenerational solidarity for children's climate-challenged future. This could assist in the public's legitimation of political structures that change the current priorities of climate-relevant policy-making. It is also important to study politicised parenthood to understand processes of cultural change. There is, however, currently a lack of research on parent intergenerational climate justice activism. As family scholars have argued, personal life is consequential for environmental challenges because families and personal relationships effect macro social change; the agency, capacity and motivations to act on climate change are grounded in the practices of embodied, emotionally charged intimate relationships (Jamieson 2016; Howell and Allen 2019). This paper addresses this gap in research by drawing on an empirical qualitative dataset to explore UK-based activist parents' conceptualisations of intergenerational justice that arise from the emotional spaces of parenting, family life and activism. In analysing parenting as a site of ethics and responsibility (McEwan and Goodman 2010), this paper looks at the micro-scale of social relations that foster and circulate meaning within these spaces.

Parental environmental activism

Parenthood and political action are not new allies, although past research has focussed mainly on mother activism (e.g. Katz 2017; Naples 1988; Panitch 2012; Weed 1993). Brookfield (2012) provides an account of women's political struggles in Canada during the nuclear crisis of the Cold War, when the government's regime of female labour force-supported civil defence was perceived by Canadian women as a negligent response to protect citizens. Motivated primarily by securing safety for their children, activists mobilised a pacifist and international disarmament agenda which contributed to ending the crisis. The US environmental justice movement arose from the deployment of the symbolic power of the mother identity in the fight to protect children from local toxic pollution. More recently, mothers have broadened their scope of motivation beyond their own children to advocate for wider issues of social justice, in what scholars have called the "21st century global motherhood movement" (Conradsen 2016, 2). This movement has operated within a feminist ethic of care principle (Tronto 1994), tackling issues of public concern such as disability, domestic violence and school reform (Panitch 2012).

Justice and morality in family life

While justice is often represented by the formal language of legal rights, obligations and equality between individuals (McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies 2003), within everyday embodied relationships, justice is enacted by a sense of what is right or wrong, tending to follow cultural codes that specify what is "good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable in society" (Stets and Carter 2012, 121). Alternatively, feminist perspectives have shown that morality in practice can be rather more complex, being emotionally guided but reflexive, operating dynamically, relationally and negotiated according to the specific context (Sevenhuijsen 1998; Held 1995). "Doing the right thing" as a parent is driven both by cultural narratives and by the relationally context-specific moments of family life. A strong sense of moral responsibility for the interests of children is an outcome of "the ways in which we have constructed the relational social categories of Adult and Child in contemporary societies" (McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies 2003, 135). The parental moral identity, influenced by gender and class, shapes ideas about fairness towards children that "encapsulates what is good for children, and what constitutes a good childhood" (McCarthy, Edwards, and Gillies 2003, 107). What follows is an outline of empirical family studies that have shown the dynamic and contextual nature of morality within ethical environmental family practices, which operate in tandem with the structuring role of cultural codes and discourses.

Family, environment and morality

There is a small body of empirical work on environment and family intersections. Phoenix et al.'s (2017) in-depth study explored how parents and their children interpret cultural discourses about environmental responsibility within different socioeconomic and local contexts in the UK and India. They found that ethical and responsible family consumption practices were structured by socioeconomic and material affordances, gender and generation. Affluent families in the UK drew on Minority world environmentalist discourses to moralise and account for the inaction of diverse others who were "unconcerned" and "ignorant" about the environment, and to disassociate themselves from "hairshirt" fanatic environmentalism. These narratives of "responsible privilege" helped to distance them from others to "affirm particular identity positions" (371) and to avoid being accused of moral hypocrisy in relation to high consumption practices. The diverse "others" included their own children, who were often viewed as less responsible than their parents, highlighting parent–child power relations that constrain children's agency to act on their own environmental concerns.

A study by Shirani and colleagues (2013) also looked at consumption, exploring ethical responsibilities to future generations within home energy use practices. The authors used a "living links" concept to understand connections participants made to environmental futures through the presence or absence of children. The authors found that both parents and those without children were concerned for the future and felt connected to it, but that taking personal responsibility for the future was contingent on the pressures of daily family life and moral discourses of "good" parenting, which often competed with moral environmental discourses.

These two studies provide useful insights into the negotiation of family life and environmental ethics within the milieu of household consumption practices. To date, research has not explored such a set of negotiations within the ethical and emotional sphere of activism. Moral discourse within social movements can create group bonds and boundaries that are activated within social dynamics to distinguish shared identity within and between groups (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Brown 2009). Symbolic boundaries create a collective representation and group vocabulary which can re-create cultural codes and narratives (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010). In this vein, it would be useful to understand how parental identities interact with the moral discourses and identities of environmentalism in this emotional space, to explore the potential of refurbishing and recirculating cultural codes and narratives that may be consequential for social justice.

Methods

The data presented in this paper are from an in-depth qualitative study involving interviews conducted from summer 2020 to early 2021. The project used a gender-sensitive approach to explore the lived experiences of UK-based mothers and fathers mobilising to address climate change. The gender-sensitive approach aimed to bring to light similarities and differences between accounts of participants of different genders. As outlined in the literature review, past research on parent-led activism has tended to focus solely on the role of mothers; with this in mind, one aim of this study was to contribute additional knowledge to the underresearched field of men, masculinities and responses to environmental issues (Connell 2017). My research questions included: (1) How does being a parent play a part in the framing of climate and ecological change, and in the motivations to become an activist? and (2) How are campaigning practices sustained or impeded by parents' personal relationships?

Recruiting was conducted through social media and snowballing. Participants were offered a £25 donation to a charity of their choice as a thank you. Informed consent was obtained via a signed information sheet. I used a purposive sampling strategy, inviting parents or guardians based in the UK who considered themselves concerned about climate change and its impact on the future of their children, and who were involved in any kind of climate change campaigning. Using a gender-sensitive approach, it was apparent in the early stages of recruitment that I was receiving considerably more interest from mothers than fathers, which was not ideal as I had planned for a gender-balanced sample. I decided to turn my social media recruitment towards a direct appeal to fathers, conveying that their voices were currently under-represented in my study. I also made greater use of the snowballing technique to leverage the contacts in my network which enabled me to approach fathers directly. These targeted approaches were largely successful, and I recruited 12 mothers (including one stepmother) and 8 fathers. Of these mothers and fathers, only two interviewees formed a relationship couple. This number of participants was deemed suitable because I had started to reach saturation of data themes, and the demands of homeschooling during the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions on mobility made recruiting parents very challenging.

My data collection methods included a solicited, semi-structured qualitative diary exercise carried out over the course of two weeks prior to the interview. As the study's focus was on the personal life context of parent activists, the aim of the diary exercise was to capture the everyday thoughts, feeling and actions relating to environmental issues in the course of family life, the more mundane moments that may be difficult to recall in an interview setting. Diary studies are also useful for "capturing the weight and meaning people attach to different events, issues and activities in their lives" (Bartlett and Milligan 2015, 14). A pilot study revealed that participants needed guidance about how to structure their diary recordings, so I provided a template document with table columns for the date, time of day, who they were with, and the details of the thought/action/feeling.

The diary exercise was followed by an in-depth, semi-structured video call interview. My interview schedule was open but included several core questions about routes into activism, motivations, how parents see climate change and the future in relation to their children and their parenting role, and how they felt parent-led campaigning was different to other types of environmental activism. I made field note memos as my thoughts and analytical insights arose throughout the fieldwork period.

I collected basic demographic and household income data. Analysis was an iterative and ongoing process, reading field notes, transcript and diary accounts multiple times for familiarisation before employing line-by-line inductive coding. Higher-level concepts were then identified, reading across the dataset. I used N-Vivo to assist in organising the data into codes, categories and themes.

Findings and discussion

Participant characteristics

Participants ranged in age from 20s to 50s, all had tertiary education, with medium to high household incomes. All but one participant were White, with one person of Pakistani heritage. Children ranged in age from pre-birth through to teenagers and, in one case, adult children. Although I originally planned to interview parent couples, my recruitment efforts revealed that it was most common for only one of a parent couple to be campaigning actively, with the other parent providing practical support of childcare and participation in ethical family consumption practices. I was given two main explanations by participants for this: the time and emotional input required for campaigning was not sustainable for both parents concurrently; and a lack of interest or motivation to campaign. All but three of the participants had been campaigning for less than 5 years, with their previous environmentalism confined to ethical consumption practices.

Despite the UK being in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, the diary exercise provided evidence that everyday concerns around climate had not abated. Participants expressed a great deal of worry about the future climate-changed world, and many spoke explicitly of feeling morally compelled to act; One mother told me: "I approach activism as a moral thing on the grounds of that I couldn't not do it. Like I would feel like I was failing as a mum if I wasn't doing it. I don't think it's a choice for me". One father expressed similar sentiments: "The effects […] not so much in my lifetime but certainly in my children's lifetime, that's where the moral obligation comes in". Participants predicted food insecurity, societal breakdown and mass extinctions without a radical change in the current order. They felt a great deal of anxiety for their children's future, but activism often helped to counter these difficult emotions.

Participants found a shared sense of desperation but also a sense of purpose and solidarity with other activists, revealed in one participant's diary which documented how regular activist group meetings provided "connection and space to talk about feelings" that related to fear, anger and sorrow. One father told me of a highly emotional encounter with an unknown fellow parent activist at an Extinction Rebellion protest, with whom he had shared tears and an embrace:

> We had this great fear for our families and for our children, and this sense of wanting to look them in the eye later on. There's so much based on what a sense of what the future may be. It's an awful shadow to live with.

Types of activism varied among the parent sample. Several were involved in parent-led groups which campaigned for change at both the local and national political levels. Many were part of the direct action group Extinction Rebellion; some were involved in activism to put climate change on the school curriculum; others were pushing for change in employer cultures and practices. All parents spoke of the need to address both governmental and cultural levels to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions and to encourage people to change their family practices towards a greater care for the environment.

Some practices of activism within this sample followed a gendered pattern. Although both mothers and fathers took part in direct actions, it was the male participants who more frequently reported preferring disruptive protest tactics, and asserting their politics within public spaces – for example by giving talks or approaching members of the public in the street to "communicate the facts" of climate change. These findings of dominant, self-expressive masculinities support work by Chan and Curnow (2017) that found men to be more likely to see themselves as experts and more likely to take up more conversation time with rational arguments. However, using a reading of gender as a situated social practice rather than a set of essentialised traits (Poggio 2006), nuances in the performance of masculine identities were found across the dataset. Within some spaces and places, fathers in this study articulated a reflexive, pro-feminist masculinity; for example, one father – Marc – spoke of "taking Extinction Rebellion principles" into his workplace managerial role to try and undo the hierarchies of business norms; by having an "open mic session" with his team members to "talk openly about feelings and issues", towards being "kinder, more human, to care more about people".

Parents were trying to manage the world for their children and they embedded climate and environmental issues into family life. All of the participants practiced as much as they could in the way of low impact travel and consumption and felt the need to model the "right" behaviour to their children. Ecologically oriented childrearing also included an encouragement of children to engage with the natural world, and for older children, family discussions were regularly initiated around the politics of climate and ecological issues, including gender and racial injustices that underpin ecological issues. I was told that this was in part due to the lack of climate change and ecological education on the school curriculum, although parents felt it was ultimately their "job" to teach it. The diary study revealed that campaigning was often all-consuming. For the participants in my sample, making sense of their moral identity as parent activists required a relationally specific, selective moralising of the actions of children, parents and extended family members. By distinguishing the moral contours of action on intergenerational justice, parents were clarifying their belonging in the emotional spaces of parent campaigning, to enjoy the solidarity of ingroup relations and to advance their justice rhetoric within a particular meaning of family. What follows is the presentation of three themes from the data which demonstrate how parent activists draw moral contours defining whom they feel should be taking action for intergenerational justice. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Moralising of children

Without prompting from me, several participants raised their reproductive decisions as a moral issue. They felt that having children was a choice – but one that was important to deliberate over responsibly in light what they saw as the problematic environmental impact of raising children. The decision to have children was justified by reframing it as a moral act; raising an ecologically conscious child could rectify the impact:

> We had some friends who had made the choice that they didn't want to bring children into this world. They had a really negative idea of the impact of it. But mine and my wife's perspective is actually, children bring hope, and they are going to help correct the wrongs. And so by raising our children in the way that we think needs to happen, they are then going to help make the world a better place. (Ryan, 30s, two children age 3 and 5)

Parents' narratives of responsible reproduction pointed to the politics of reproduction seeping into everyday climate discourse. Contemporary richer-world framings of parenthood suggest it is a personal choice and matter of ethical deliberation (Dow 2016). Freya justified her reproductive decision by extending the moral contour around her child's generational cohort. Further distinguishing her future child's moral status, she morally delineates the "trouble" with "the current generation":

> Hopefully this is going to be a generation of people who at no point think that their actions don't have an impact on the planet […] So I'm hopeful that the next generation and my child included I'm going to live pretty consciously. I suppose the trouble is the current generation, making sure that we get that in motion as soon as possible, so that they have a hope! (Freya, 20s, pregnant with first child)

In speaking of the optimism created from raising "good" environmentalist children, participants were reflexively linking procreation, responsible parenting practices and climate change issues, demonstrating the multi-layered, complex ways that participants understood and enacted intergenerational justice. Several parents spoke of feeling optimistic that their children are "going to make everything better". Charlotte – who, unprompted – told me she felt very guilty about having four children, felt a sense of relief in watching her daughter connect with nature, a relationship she had fostered through engaging her children in outdoor family practices:

> […] my daughter said "Mum, shall we go and see that tree on the way home? I'm really looking forward to seeing it again!" […] And it was one of those moments where I thought, it's going to be OK! Like, if that can happen all the time, like if a human can love that tree […]then we've got hope, haven't we? (Charlotte, 30s, four children age 8 and under)

In contrast to the moral boundary of "good" environmentalist children, some fathers in my sample were more likely to be ambivalent about the moral agency of their children, and drew boundaries of generational hierarchy to distinguish children's innocence and lack of environmental responsibility (Phoenix et al. 2017). Peter (30s, two children age 1 and 5) talked about encouraging his son to enjoy engaging in books about sea life but felt "sad" that this entailed learning about plastic pollution as he believed that his son was "not complicit" in this issue and asserted that "it's not children who should be sorting this out". Similarly, Alexander (30s, one child age 13) thought that it was unfair for today's children to have to change their standard of living from that enjoyed today, adding that Greta Thunberg "shouldn't be campaigning for the climate" because she is "only seventeen".

However, the perceived lower status of, and lack of power held by, children was capitalised upon by several parents. When I asked Ryan about family identities in campaigning, he felt that the presence of children on a climate march "can be really neutralising" in the face of public aggression, and he believes people see them as separate from consumer society, therefore morally guarding parents against accusations of hypocrisy:

> [… ..] they are kind of our part of society, but they're not. They're not consuming and they're not part of that system. So actually, that detachment allows them to have a bit of a different perspective. Because I think a lot of people who are adults have bought into the system and therefore think that if they start to criticise it then they're becoming hypocrites, and that they can't do that. Whereas children, being separate, kind of have that role to play. (Ryan, 30s, two children age 3 and 5)

With other participants, the picture of children's moral status is nuanced, with Marc highlighting some of the tensions in what he sees as burdensome climate action and missing out on a "normal childhood":

> Diary 5 Sept: I sometimes wish Millie was more active on climate as she was back in 2018 and 19. But at the same time I want her to just have a normal childhood. I don't want to fill her head constantly with talk about climate breakdown, ecosystem destruction, mass extinction, broken democracy etc. It's too much. Also the burden for action should not be on the young. (Marc, 50s, one child age 16)

Like other fathers in this study, Marc is conforming to a cultural idea of childhood as one of innocence and passivity, but as a social construction, childhood is contingent on where different cultural and institutional structures set the upper age limit (Hill and Tisdall 1997). In Britain, Marc's daughter's age of 16 is where children are seen to begin the transition into adulthood, and this could play a part in Marc's ambivalent feelings about the suitability of his daughter taking part in climate activism.

Moralising the parent identity

Participants said they strategically foregrounded their parent identity in campaigning to present moderate "normal everyday parental concerns". This was chiefly a strategy to counter the stigma of the environmental activist identity (Barr and Gilg 2006; Hargreaves 2011). Citing the desire to distance themselves from what they felt the public saw as "a bunch of tree hugging hippies", participants told me that "Extinction Rebellion is not my identity", and "I'm a climate funder, campaigner, board member, Investor, charity trustee but I'm a mother first".

Marc demonstrated that parent activists themselves can stigmatise environmentalists:

> I don't like activism and protest [labels] because it just compartmentalises you, and then you'll just be one of those people! I really like the term "parents for the future" [organisation]. It's normal people who have had enough, and that is my experience with XR, it's just normal people who want to do something.

The presentation of a professional frontstage image (Goffman 1959) was one way that the boundary between parent activist and environmental activist was re-configured; Ryan explains how he attenuates the environmentalist cultural stereotype by sartorially presenting an image of respectable professional:

I purposely make the effort to wear a shirt, so that I'm not perceived to be some hippie! Because that's the perception often, that it's some sort of crazy hippie, and then that doesn't give you much gravitas. (Ryan, 30s, two daughters age 3 and 5)

Parenthood was seen as playing an important moral role within society. Tim (50s, two sons age 20s) asserted, "there's no job more important than being a parent … we all bring up our children as best we can, and hope that the next generation is going to be better". The moral agency of parenthood meant several participants made assumptions that parents were more concerned than people without children about the global threat of climate change. Sophia (30s, one child age 2) thought being a parent meant "[climate change] it's scary. People like my sister, who do not have a child, don't quite feel it maybe". The assumption that the capacity to *care about* children requires the position of child *carer* constructs a symbolic boundary that excludes non-parents in claims to and responsibility for the future (Rosen and Suissa 2020). Additionally, the catch-all parental frame does not explain the different levels of concern for children *between* parents; Sophia later told me that her husband, who is not a campaigner, was not particularly worried about climate change's impact on their daughter.

The in-group thinking about motherhood arose again when a remark made by an organiser of parent group during a phone call spurred me to record this field note:

12 June: Spoke to Jane who said she could help promote my study invitation, we chatted about the origins of the parent group. In the context of her telling me that climate change makes her terrified for her children, she asked whether I have kids, to which I replied no. I don't know why she asked me this; it made me feel a bit alienated from her. I wasn't sure whether she considered it a pre-requisite for being scared about the future, or a pre-requisite for researching parenting.

I felt Sophia's question might relate to gendered assumptions about me as "the imaginary mother" as a "responsibilised moral agent" (Wilkinson 2020, 667) in my investigations of intergenerational concern. I decided that going forward, I would only disclose my non-parent status if asked directly. This situation led to Lena displaying embarrassment about her assumptions that I had children:

Lena: […] So amongst my friends that don't have babies … . I think they're not as much [environmentally conscious] as me because they don't have children, I mean I think when you have … .. do **you** have a child?

Interviewer: I don't, no!

Lena: Well I was going to make the assumption, that I think people are more passionate when they've got children, thinking about the future, but obviously that's not true because you're … [chuckles] obviously very passionate! (Lena, 30s, one 1 year-old, 2nd baby on the way)

In subsequent interviews I gained an insight into how moral parenthood was mobilised. Participants explained that the parent identity was deliberately deployed as a way to broach the boundaries of traditional environmentalism; having children along to a march was seen as "a really powerful bridge between climate activists and the general public". Marc told me he would often say to people he canvassed "it's often framed as the green environmental issue, and my point is no, it's not! It's about our children's future!". Marc used this as a strategy to find common emotional ground with people he canvassed on the street: "Quite often the first thing I'll say to people that I talk to on the streets as well, is: have you got children? […]. What we're trying to do is protect our children, which is our first responsibility". This indicates that Marc sees *all* parents as holding a responsibility to take action on climate change and that his hopes of tapping into this moral realm would augment the movement.

This moralised parent identity as a strategy to find common ground with the public extended to building bridges with levers of power. One parent group organiser said that MPs were usually happier to engage with young families because it feels less confrontational than constituent meetings with traditional environmentalists, based on their assumptions that parents with children would be law-abiding and "kind of normal". Patricia, the co-founder of a parent action group, outlined her thoughts that being a parent is a common experience that could cut across political as well as class and race boundaries:

> The parent voice is so powerful … I think that idea of providing for your children, providing for their welfare is intrinsic to so many people. No matter where they sit on the political spectrum […]. And I think any parent will tell you that being a parent is a leveller, in the sense that you start speaking to all kinds of people that you wouldn't have done otherwise. […] so there is just something quite unifying about being a parent that I think does open the door. And no one, whether you're on the political right or left would want to say that they want to do harm to children, or their children. That's a complete political anathema! So the starting point is, we're mobilising for a healthy planet for our children, no one can disagree with that! (Patricia, 30s, 3 children of 2, 7 and 9)

Moralising extended family

The emotional space of parent activism was delineated from everyday discussions with other family members. Participants told me climate change and the impact on today's children was rarely discussed within conversations with extended family, often because they felt older relatives "just don't get it". Several participants spoke of "drawing a line" when I asked them what they thought about their own parents getting involved in fighting climate change. Peter explained to me that his parents "haven't really grown up with it, so I kind of draw a line there I think". Peter went on to assert that "it's our generation who are the ones who need to be dealing with it", serving to both excuse and exclude his parents. In a similar way, Marius made excuses for his parents, comparing levels of consumption in his evaluation of his parents' contributions to climate change:

> I think they knew a lot less than we know. My parents were probably a bit wealthier than I am, and yet lived a much lower carbon lifestyle […] they'd go on holiday only once a year. Whereas, by the time I was 25, I was on a flight every couple months or something. And so I think that they are statistically less culpable. And morally in terms of like, knowing the impacts of this stuff, they're less culpable. (Marius, 30s, one child age 4)

This selective moralising that excused older people was also evident when I asked Patricia what she thought about generational differences in concern and action for climate change. She did not talk about civic or political participation, but rather connected consumption to the environmental future:

> I think that generational issue is really difficult, like grandparents who fly all the time, haven't changed their lifestyle, and who are like: well I haven't got much time left! And I can see where they're coming from as well.

Patricia's recourse to time and life stage as an excuse was interesting when we consider a distributive intergenerational justice framework would in fact see grandparents and their historical contribution to greenhouse gas levels in a *greater* position of responsibility. However, the avoidance of imposing expectations on some relatives – including siblings and aunts – was also performed as an act of care, of wanting to preserve good relationships, and to prevent emotionally close relatives from feeling guilty in comparison to the standard of others, as Marius explains:

> My family are very close […] my brothers, my mum and dad - I accept them as they are, and I don't want to try and change them. But at the same time […], even if you're not judgmental about it - by people knowing you've got a stance on it affects other people's views on, views on themselves. And that's a difficult thing to do in a family

The selective moralising that bracketed off extended family members from taking responsibility can be seen as an act of care; concerns for the future are suspended temporarily to protect the *present* for their relatives. Participants felt that they did not want to impose their politics on intimate others, they did not want to make them feel awkward. It is not to say that grandparents or other relatives are not concerned about the implications of climate change on future generations, as research has found (Shirani et al. 2013).

In a similar way, Dee suspended any judgment of family consumption interactions because it was entangled with practices of giving and receiving care, and recognised that accepting transgressions of her own ethical boundaries was part of the wider goal of protecting life in all its forms:

> … And it feels like grandparents, and aunts and uncles, and godparents […] are allowed to do what parents can't do, they're the rule breakers! […] So you take on board the specific circumstances of family member or

the person who you might have differing ideas from [...], you suspend that on the basis of the specific person, I think. I think that environmental stuff, you've got to approach it from a sort of, a humanity approach. This is about protecting life, people as much as it is about the animals. No one goes first, right? (Dee, 40s, two children age 6 and 3)

By reasoning that there is no natural hierarchy in nature, Dee is adopting an equality of all approach, which respects "the intrinsic value of every other person" (Adam and Groves 2007, 147). This perhaps shows that in the context of personal life, using the principle of an ethic of care in the message for intergenerational justice can sometimes be a complex matter.

General discussion

This paper set out to investigate activist parents' reasoning of intergenerational justice in everyday lives, in particular how this arises from parental identities and moral discourses and identities of environmentalism. In so doing, it explored the potential for cultural narratives about activism for intergenerational justice to be refurbished and recirculated. The study found that motivations to act on climate were deeply emotional; as well as grief about worsening global conditions, parents felt fear about the future for their children which drove a moral imperative to effect change. The emotional spaces of parenting and activism were managed and demarcated symbolically through relational, discursive means through boundary work (Lamont and Molnar 2002; Pachucki, Pender-grass, and Lamont 2007). This created moral spaces that were exclusionary, deployed to define, distinguish and legitimise the collective activist parent identity (Lamont 1992). Adding to the theory on boundary work, the research also found that symbolic boundaries were often re-drawn in a selective way to include or excuse others.

Children and childrearing were the subject and focus of parent activists' symbolic demarcation, informed by cultural scripts and codes about what it means to be a "good" parent for the climate. Moral dilemmas about choosing whether to procreate may be influenced by environmentalist discourses of the carbon footprint of raising children. The politics of reproduction are increasingly overlapping with environmental politics (Lappé, Hein, and Landecker 2019). Procreation has been demonised as a burden on ever-depleting resources, reproducing one's impact well into the future as a carbon legacy (Murtaugh and Schlax 2009; Wynes and Nicholas 2017; Sasser 2018). At the same time, children are often culturally represented as an optimistic project of hope for changing the trajectory of human impact. Childhood is seen as a crucial pedagogical window to shape ecological values, norms, practices and identities that enable the environmentalist child to grow up as a steward of the planet (Kraftl 2008). This futurism is seen in the responsibilisation of children as subjects of education schemes and sustainability policy interventions, children are seen to be sites of influence and progressive consumption change within family and home life (Phoenix et al. 2017), as well as being encouraged by parents to collaborate in ethico-politicised family practices (Payne 2010; Istead and Shapiro 2014). Parents in my study showed how the politics of reproduction and the cultural representations of children as hope for the future influence their justification to have children, and by raising "good" environmentalist children, parents kept their in-group parent activist status and this reaffirmed a desirable identity position (Boddy et al. 2016). However, this may be problematic as Walker's (2017) empirical study found, assigning children the identity of "next generation" environmental activists can be at odds with the extent to which children wished to push for change. Another issue with boundary work around the "good" environmentalist family is when the privileges and affordances of a future-oriented environmentalism are not enjoyed by all, a classism that was found by Phoenix and her colleagues (2017) when environmentalist parents disparaged the non-environmentalist "other" family.

In contrast to framing children as moral agents for the future, some parents – in particular the fathers in my sample, drew boundaries around their younger children, asserting they should not have to "sort out the mess of today's generation". This consigned children too innocent and non-complicit passive subjects, as victims rather than actors (Stephens 1996). This links to cultural

ideas about children lacking power and status, which has the effect of dismissing their agency to advocate for themselves, to think independently (Cassidy and Lone 2020) and to influence the environmental views of others (Uzzell et al. 1994). Childhood is a bounded social category within most Western societies (Kraftl 2008), defined by adults rather than by children themselves (Hill and Tisdall 1997), and some see children as humans-in-the-making rather than human beings (Qvortrup 1994). However, the boundaries between childhood and adulthood are problematic if children are to be recognised as legitimate social actors to participate in climate decision-making (Cassidy and Lone 2020; Dunlop et al. 2021).

Parenting was considered "the most important job", and being a parent was a salient identity. Assumptions about the motivations of people who did not have children are a form of disidentification and further delineated the in-groupness of moral parenthood. While not all of my participants were in heterosexual nuclear family units (there was one same-sex relationship and several participants who had separated from their partner), the majority were part of heterosexual couple, and all had biologically related children. In their assumptions that parents care more than non-parents about children's future, the participants were naturalising adult–child connections of care. A queer reading uncovers how normative heterosexuality can have a structuring effect (Gaard 1997). Participants' essentialising of adult–child relations devalues the concern of non-parents who may feel compassion and take action on behalf of children and their future. Edelman (2004) critiques reproductive logic in contemplating the future, arguing that procreative norms lend parents a moral position to project the actions of today into the future, "through concern for and imaginaries of their descendants' lives" (Rosen and Suissa 2020, 127). For Edelman, the future represented by the "perpetual horizon" of the child pervades cultural politics as a "structuring optimism" (2–4), suggesting a special power of parents. Such structuring casts aside the possibility of alternative communal relations (Edelman 2004).

Supporting Phoenix et al.'s (2017) empirical work, participants in this sample distanced themselves from stereotyped environmentalists, often referring to them pejoratively as "hippies". By constructing moral boundaries around their own "normal parent" identity, participants protected themselves from stigma and criticism of the daily environmental transgressions of family practices (Phoenix et al. 2017), but in turn, bridged the public – political worlds by constructing a moderate and "safe" identity to which politicians could relate. Participants' narratives of parental symbolic power chimes with the recent ascendancy of the parent voice in UK politics (Jensen 2018), and builds on environmental advocacy in the US that has successfully leveraged parenthood as a narrative persuasion technique (Munro 2017). In the UK, family as political rhetoric aligns with conservative ideologies of stability, tradition and continuity (Little and Winch 2017). Within this logic, by representing the concerned parent in their constituency, MPs of all parties can fit in better with the social and institutional norms of Westminster than representing more radical constituent identities (Willis 2020). The UK Conservative party, having held a majority in government since 2017, has an uncomfortable relationship with climate change policy. Notwithstanding the current Prime Minister Boris Johnson's disdain for environmental protesters (Laville and Taylor 2019), the party has not acted on the scientific recommendations which urge a rapid decarbonisation of the economy. This regime, termed "new denialism" (Buranyi 2019; Daub et al., 2021) acknowledges fossil fuel's role in global heating while taking no meaningful action that is commensurate with the urgency. Against this political context, I suggest that activists are seeking new ways to connect to government that are akin to Lorenzen et al.'s (2016) study of US environmentalists' deployment of moderate identities to cut through to Republican legislators. However, as parents foreground their identity as they engage with MPs and other levers of power, the codifying of reproductive morality could entrench a moral narrative of naturalised adult–child relations.

When asked about the involvement of their extended family in fighting climate change, many participants "drew a line" effectively excusing the non-participation of older relatives, particularly their own parents. The logic of relatives not knowing the impact of past practices indicates that some participants were basing responsibility for the future on the knowledge of causality of one's

actions. This led them to a logic of blamelessness and, therefore, lack of responsibility (Adam and Groves 2007). This reflects common understandings of responsibility "being rooted in causal author-ship of harm" (Adam and Groves 2007, 144), which has implications for who parent activists think should be taking action to push for political and social change. Boundaries were drawn around older people by defining their participation only in terms of consumption; civic engagement of older relatives was not mentioned, suggesting that it is considered an unsuitable realm for older people. Assumptions about older people as set in their ways, being unreceptive to new ideas and unable to cope with the demands of activism might be seen as a form of ageism and generational-ism, an undesirable outcome as it can damaging community social integration and reinforce the marginalisation of older people (Scharf et al. 2001; Little and Winch 2017; Farber 2020). The exclusion of older people from political citizenship mirrors the marginalisation children have experienced in this realm (Nolas, Varvantakis, and Aruldoss 2017).

There is a further issue with the framing of how older relatives engage (or not) with issues of climate justice. Using a lens of consumption to bracket off older relatives from taking action could be limiting. If climate campaigners ignore older people in their aims to grow the political movement, they are missing the chance to persuade a large politically engaged cohort of people in the UK; 1 in 5 people in the UK were over the age of 65 in 2018, with 74% turning out to vote at the 2019 general election (ONS 2019). But considering that 64% of this cohort voted Conservative compared to the 27% and 36% of 25–34 and 35–44 age cohorts, respectively (Ipsos MORI 2021), cam-paigners' efforts to push for a more progressive politics for change towards climate justice might be a challenge. With an ageing population, the risks of an increasing conservatism and anti-youth senti-ment mean that politicisation of older people to engage in social justice is becoming increasingly important (Guillemot and Price 2017). Families have an important part to play in this regard, as a politicising institution they can transmit knowledge, behaviours and skills (Guillemot and Price 2017). Empirical studies have shown that older people can be politicised for the first time in later life, debunking assumptions of their frailty (Guillemot and Price 2017). Other work has found that environmental activism in older age groups enabled an intergenerational community cohesion and provided older people a new sense of meaning in a post-work life (Gearey and Ravenscroft 2019). Moreover, dealing with the threat of climate change will require a greater number of people to engage civically and politically, and older people have been deemed an underutilised resource to benefit national mitigation efforts and contribute to community resilience (Cohen et al. 2016; Pillemer et al. 2021).

The research found that drawing moral boundaries around the emotional spaces of activism and parenting was often flexible, highlighting a compatibility between practices of intimacy and the interests of community (Jamieson 2005). Activists showed in their willingness to share emotionally intimate encounters with other activists, enabling them to circulate meaning and build a common identity and sense of solidarity. In particular, the fathers' transforming of norms of invulnerable and tough maleness into a connection with one's inner emotional self that is expressed publicly and pol-itically in relational, embodied displays of caring, and in demands for justice for environment and children suggests ecological masculinity that confronts and re-draws the borders of mainstream hegemonic masculine norms (Pulé 2013; Hultman and Pulé 2018). This boundary-reconfiguring was also found in Marc's reflexive refusal to align with masculine dominant business norms by taking a caring and non-hierarchical approach in interactions with his team, and in the various ways that fathers were socialising their children to be sensitive to gender and racial oppression. Caring for the local and global commons has long been associated with feminine and maternal traits (Macgregor and Seymour 2017), but research is beginning to uncover sites where men are interrogating and challenging their personal role in reproducing intersecting gender and ecological inequalities and through this process, reconstructing their gendered self (Connell 1990; Twine 2018; Hedenqvist et al. 2021). In the examples of compassionate masculinities in this study, fathers were drawing on, and recirculating learned eco-activist vocabulary and codes of care for others, connec-tions between self and all life on Earth, and non-violent protest, and enacting these within their

personal, family and work lives. Notwithstanding the occasional contradictions of a plurality of mas-culinities in this sample of activist fathers (Connell 2017), such pathways of reflexive ecologisation may nonetheless be valuable as part of a feminist agenda to confront the socially constructed boundaries of "malestream" norms (Hultman and Pulé 2018).

The research found that boundaries were also fluid to protect relationships with other relatives, such as siblings who did not share political views. Relatives' transgressions of environmentalist con-sumption codes were granted to prevent moments of awkwardness and to maintain intimacy. This demonstrates that morality is entangled and intersubjectively constituted within the specific moments of everyday family life (Holdsworth and Morgan 2007), alongside being influenced by wider cultural and normative discourses (Finch 1989).

Conclusion

This paper has explored the under studied emergence of parent-led intergenerational justice acti-vism in the UK, by examining the emotional spaces and cultural context of parents politicising their concern for their children's future. In so doing, it aimed to consider how parent activism might recreate a moral narrative about children's climate-challenged future and shift political and public conversation. Parent activism plays an important role in advocating for children's and future generations' interests. A parental ethic to re-frame intergenerational justice ushers in a much needed input to a conversation that has hitherto been encumbered by the ideas of genera-tional conflicts of interest (Barry 1997) and the abstractness, and non-identifiability of future gener-ations. The study therefore contributes to debates about the role of an ethic of care within the public realm (Tronto 1994). Supporting the research of Howell (2013), this study has shown that the issue of social justice can be as important as "nature" or "the environment" in motivating some people to act on climate change. It also demonstrates how the boundaries of commonly understood environment-alism may be stretched to more holistically engage with climate change. The study supports work by Shirani and her colleagues (2013) on the role of children as living links to the future that shape parents' views and actions on sustainability. New insights have been provided into the role of fathers' environmental activism, which warrants further research to connect ecological forms of mas-culinity to family and environmental issues (Hultman and Pulé 2018).

The research also showed that the symbolic moral boundary work of parents within the emotional spaces of activism and parenting may limit the movement's ability to advance a social justice rhetoric. Identity-driven activism facilitates a collective agency, which is enacted within bounded moral spaces that define the collective as right and good (Cerulo 1997; Lamont and Molnar 2002). However, because identity-based movements form relative to distinc-tions, movements may struggle to bridge to social actors beyond their identity boundary (Piore 1995) – in this case, to adults without children. When we consider that policy changes that reori-ent priorities to future generations will require a broad and diverse public support brought about by cultural change, there are implications for the reach of the moral parent discourses found in this study to broaden intergenerational solidarity. Additionally, identity meanings are circulated within, and reinforced by, the everyday relations and social practices of family. Participants drew relational moral boundaries that are a function of entwined moral discourses of good parenting and environmentalism, with the predominant narrative being that protecting children's future is a matter for parents. The study found this could exclude and marginalise the participation of younger children and older adult relatives, which presents issues of social justice for these groups to participate in public conversations and political decision-making on intergenerational fairness.

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