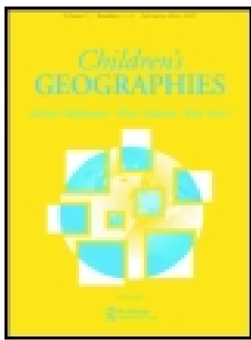

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Towards interdependence: using slings to inspire a new understanding of parental care

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ABSTRACT
Based on empirical research with parents who carry their children in slings, I propose what I hope will be a new and more progressive way of understanding of parental care relationships, where ideas of dependence/independence are replaced by those of interdependence. Through engagement with feminist literatures which stress relationality between humans and non-humans, I suggest that it may be helpful to broaden our understanding of parental care from an exclusive focus on the mother–child relationship in order to recognise a wider range of actors as participating in this process – including children themselves and the more than human world. Crucially, I also consider the potential for care to flow in multiple directions within these relationships.

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> Some of the advice they [health professionals] give really conflicts with other advice they give. So on the one hand they are saying that … having them so close is such a good thing and then on the other hand they are saying, well therefore they must sleep in their … own bed. (Sarah)

> I remember the first time the Health Visitor came round … and I wasn't wearing him [in the sling]. She was ecstatic, she was like 'Oh you've put him down' … like it was this great achievement … And I was like, 'Well you know … There was nothing bad about the fact that I was doing it.' (Christina)

Here, Sarah and Christina describe a crucial but underexplored dimension of the transition to parenthood: the question of where to 'put' a new baby. Contemporary studies in anthropology argue that newborns may have more capacity for autonomous movement than we give them credit for (Cyrille 2018). However, none of this detracts from the fact that, in contrast to other mammals, human babies are born with a limited capacity to move themselves and hence it falls largely to their adult caregivers to 'place' them. But where? Should you put the babe in arms? In a sling? In a crib? Pram? Car seat? Baby rocker? Which of these options is taken in any given moment will of course depend on a whole host of factors – including what material options are available, what else is going on in the immediate surroundings and how baby and caregiver are doing physically and mentally at any given time. Crucially, however, there is also a normative dimension to these questions. For me, Sarah and Christina's experiences allude to a bigger – and crucial – tension experienced by many women – a societal vision of the mother as loving yet also responsible for her child's growing development and independence. During early childhood in particular, this tension is often felt in relation to the 'appropriate' level of physical closeness between mother and child with the 'pick them up/put them down' dilemma forming a particular focus of concern. In this article, I use research with

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parents who carry their children in slings to show how the question of 'what is a child's place?' can be related to bigger debates about the role of children and parents in society.

My point of departure for this is the prominent critique of intensive mothering discourse which while restating the mother's role as the central care giver, now emphasises the importance of 'lavishing copious amounts of time, energy, and material resources on the child' in '*child-centred, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive*' childrearing. (Hays 1996, 8; in Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2016, 378)

By exploring the experiences of sling using parents and bringing them into conversation with feminist literatures which stress relationality between humans and non-humans, I propose what I hope will be a new and more progressive way of understanding parental care relationships. Specifically, I suggest that it may be helpful to broaden our understanding of parental care from an exclusive focus on the mother–child relationship in order to recognise a wider range of actors as participating in this process. Crucially, I also consider the potential for care to flow in multiple directions in ways which challenge conventional notions of 'dependence' and 'independence' in our understanding of childcare.

Introducing slings

Today, there is a wide variety of sling types, from woven wraps to buckle carriers and everything in between, as well as many different carrying positions (front, back or hip). However, the hallmark of all slings is the way in which they involve the child being carried on the body of the parent (see examples in Figure 1).

Claiming that slings are a 'new' entrant into the world of parenting materialities is misleading since, while the pram was only invented in the eighteenth century, slings have a rich cultural heritage and continue to be the norm in many parts of the world today (Van Hout 2008). However, in the UK and many other countries in the Global North, the pram has become the norm – hence the perception that slings are new. Certainly there is much of novelty about them in a UK context; while there is no data on the number of sling users in the UK, we can point to a big growth in the number of sling libraries since 2009 (South East Slings 2018). A sling library works in a similar way to a book library: the library owns a collection of slings which parents can borrow. Hires happen at sling meets where parents are given training and support in choosing and using a sling. Most libraries are run by volunteers and profits from hire fees tend to go back into the running of the library.

Figure 1. Examples of slings.

We can also highlight growth and diversification in sling manufacture which has developed into a significant cottage industry. For example, some of the most popular slings in use today did not exist when my son was a baby seven years ago.

While many people are initially drawn to the sling as a mobility device, its design – with the child being held on the body of the adult – also fosters a different kind of relationality between the child and the adult carrier (Whittle 2019). Slings are thus a fascinating case to explore, since changes in the material world can also mean different ways of 'doing' parenting and family (Boyer and Spinney 2016; Hall and Holdsworth 2016).

The literature review that follows begins by exploring debates on the role of parents and children in society before moving on to consider the ways in which material feminist literatures and work on relationality may enhance this.

Parents, children and 'independence'

Contemporary society is challenging for parents and children in many ways. Admittedly, there have been social and political breakthroughs (to give just two examples, we have the UN convention on the rights of the child in 1992 and, here in the UK, shared parental leave became possible in 2015). However, considerable inequalities remain with women and children, in particular, likely to bear the brunt of these. As Johnson and Johnston (2019) have emphasised, this is by no means a uniform experience and hence it is really important to consider how mothering is often experienced very differently depending on class, ethnicity and culture. There is a wealth of scholarship on these topics that I cannot do justice to here and I would really welcome reflections from scholars who wish to explore the ideas in this paper from more diverse perspectives since I am conscious that what I write here is inevitably constrained by the context in which I worked.

Feminist geographical scholarship has illustrated how women can find themselves at the confluence of intersecting pressures – the increasing expectation that they will contribute to the labour market whilst also continuing to bear the brunt of the domestic responsibilities. Meanwhile the rise of intensive mothering cultures places an increased emphasis on the mother's role as primary caregiver (Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson 2016; Damaske 2013). For example, feminist political economists point to the growing need for women to hold a paying job in addition to mothering which stems from the neoliberalisation of the economy (for example Holloway and Pimlott-Wilson (2016) talk of the 'one-and-a-half breadwinner model' that applies in many middle-class UK households). More recently, school closures and related disruption from Covid-19 seem poised to exacerbate pre-existing inequalities in relation to gender, with UN Secretary-General António Guterres noting that 'COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women's rights' (quoted in Burki 2020).

In general, then, it can be very hard for women to 'win': if they return to work they are criticised for neglecting their families but, if they stay at home, they are perceived as selfish and over-indulgent of their children (Damaske 2013). A host of research plays testament to the emotional and affectual pressures on mothers in society, with Lawler's (2000) work highlighting how 'good mothering' comes to be associated with middle-class values, thus excluding all those who do not fit this understanding of parenting.

In recent years, geographical scholarship on gender and parenting has also embraced fathering and grandfathering by exploring the ways in which men engage with family life and caring responsibilities (Tarrant 2018; Tarrant et al. 2017). Particularly important here was Aitken's (2000) research with fathers in the US which showed that gender stereotypes often go unchallenged since even very involved dads see their role as that of 'helping out' their (female) partners rather than taking on the main responsibility for childcare themselves. These findings lead Aitken to talk of a 'crisis in fathering' which is 'that men do not recognize themselves in contemporary cultures of fatherhood that draw on motherhood as a benchmark and patriarchy as a citational practice' (597).

Still other literatures have explored the marginalisation of children and families within public space. For example, researchers have pointed out that cities are designed primarily for the needs of capital and this can lead to the exclusion of children and families through a lack of safe spaces to walk and play (Karsten 2006; Cope 2008 McDowell 1993). Efforts are currently being made to address this, for example through the UNICEF Child-Friendly City Initiative (CFCI) which picks up on debates about a 'right to the city' (Woolcock, Gleeson, and Randolph 2010). However, many of these discussions relate to children of toddler age and upwards, with fewer contributors exploring the experience of infants and their carers and, in particular, the impact of urban infrastructure which is not designed with prams in mind (Clement and Waitt 2018; Boyer 2014, 2016). However, such exclusion is not solely a matter of urban infrastructure, since parents will also avoid places where they may experience embarrassment or judgement (for example, not wanting to be in a restaurant with a crying child) (Whittle 2019; Boyer and Spinney 2016). Studies of breastfeeding have had similar conclusions, highlighting the importance of creating spaces where women feel welcome to feed (Pain, Bailey, and Mowl 2001).

The preceding discussion, together with my previous work which conducted a detailed analysis of infant/parent mobilities (Whittle 2019), shows that even more privileged women and children can experience limitations in the extent to which they can participate in contemporary society and space due to a whole host of factors; from the restrictive gender stereotypes and time pressures of juggling work and family life through to the design of the urban environment. The question is, how best to address the economic, cultural and normative pressures which limit the possibilities for women and children in society? I'd argue that we can draw inspiration from two additional branches of literature: firstly, perspectives which emphasise the role of the more than human world in parenting and, secondly, broader feminist literatures on the ethics of care which understand the world as relational and interdependent. As I hope to demonstrate in this article, forming connections between these literatures can enable us to re-theorise parental care in a more progressive direction by widening the scope of 'who' cares and also by changing our perceptions on the direction in which care flows within these relationships.

In recent years, a growing body of scholarship has started exploring how parenting intersects with the more than human world. For example, Boyer and Spinney's (2016) study of pram mobilities in London shows how the experience of travelling around with the pram forms a central part of how women come to understand themselves as mothers. They emphasise that mothering involves a host of materialities (wipes, nappies, muslins, changing mats, feeding bottles etc.) and show how developing competence with these is often associated with being a 'good' mother. Such studies add a valuable new perspective to the focus on family practices which has arisen in children and family geographies in recent years (Hall and Holdsworth 2016) because they illustrate that the ways in which we 'do family' are also shaped by interactions with the non-human world. This is important in relation to the present study as it allows us to stay alert to the possibility that using a sling to carry your child can also lead to changes in how we parent.

However, it is not just material objects that play a role in parenting. Research has also highlighted the contribution of the physical body, emotions and affects in the parenting experience. For example, Lupton's work on 'interembodiment' (2013) and Tahhan's work on skinship (2010, 2013) explore how sensuous and embodied forms of intimacy between parents and children – which include, but are not restricted to, instances of close physical proximity (for example, co-sleeping, bathing, breastfeeding) – come to shape how we understand ourselves as parents and children.

Such concepts are useful for studies of sling use since the deliberate 're-bodying' of parenting that a sling facilitates provides a direct contrast to many of the other objects advertised to parents (dummies, rockers, pushchairs, etc.) which are designed to mediate between bodies (Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn 1997). As the quotes which started the article indicate, such different ideas about the 'place' of children cause considerable ambiguities for mothers who feel they need to strike a balance between being loving and nurturing (pick them up) whilst also being seen as architects of their children's independence and development (put them down).

Contemporary parenting narratives also tend to be based on the assumption that children must be taught to become more independent over time (Department for Education 2017). However, concepts of dependence and independence can be contrasted with a broader feminist ontology which stresses relational interdependence and mutual needs (Mountz et al. 2015; Brown 2015; Simard-Gagnon 2016; Jones and Whittle 2021). Scholarship on the ethics of care has made a particularly strong contribution here. For example, Lisa Guenther's book 'the Gift of the Other' (2006) hits back at the exploitation of maternal generosity as she develops a feminist politics of motherhood based around the implications of understanding birth as a gift which brings with it a radical responsibility for Others. More specifically in relation to research on childhood mobilities, Cortés-Morales (2021) draws on Rautio's (2013) post-humanist approach to childhood. She argues that such an approach, which, in turn, draws from Barad's (2007) ideas of entanglements and intra-action, is vital in enabling us to overcome the (often normative) dichotomy between dependence and independence which often emerges in the literature on childhood mobilities: 'When seen from the logic of entanglements, dependencies in relation to various others are what allows humans to be mobile, to become what they are in relation to those others, to act, affect and be affected' (10). Equally, Holt's work on infant geographies explores the ways in which we come to understand ourselves through relationships with others during the earliest stages of life (2013).

Using these concepts of relationality, I want to explore whether it is possible to think differently about parental care. In doing so, I hope to respond to some of the challenges which can limit the possibilities for families, women and children in space and place.

Methodology

The main method for the study involved 24 semi-structured interviews with sling using parents in the Morecambe Bay and Sheffield areas.[1] These areas were easily accessible within time and budget constraints whilst also offering some diversity in terms of the physical and social environment.

Both areas had thriving sling library networks and participants were recruited through two of these (Morecambe Bay Slings (MBS) and Sheffield Sling Surgery). I tried to ensure as much diversity as possible in my sample so I interviewed Mums and Dads, aged from 20s-40s, with children from a few months old to school aged. The participants' financial circumstances varied considerably and, while most were White British, several were from other cultural backgrounds. One participant was also in a same sex relationship. After the interviews were taped and transcribed, I analysed them using an approach based on grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1994).

This study also came about through my own immersion in the world of slings, which started when my son was born seven years ago. For a variety of reasons, I found slings worked really well for us and I started volunteering at MBS when my son was 8 months old, meaning I was also a member of the community I was researching (Kindon, Pain, and Kesby 2010). Consequently autoethnography (Wall 2008) came to play a role, since I would reflect openly on my own positionality and experiences of sling use both during and after the interviews. Indeed, there were times when the interviews felt more like conversations: particularly in the Morecambe Bay area, where many of the participants knew me through my library role, it felt natural to bring up my own experiences as we tried to figure things out together.

I begin the analysis by exploring different reactions to physical closeness between parent and child, before going on to consider the range of human and non-human actors involved in parental care relationships.

Re-bodying parental care

As explained previously, all slings position a child high up – and therefore very visibly – on the body of an adult. This, combined with the fact that slings are in a minority in wider UK society in

comparison to the social norm of the pram or pushchair, means that other people will often comment on the sling as a point of difference. As with many cases of perceived 'difference' in society, reactions can be polarised.

For example, Mair was surprised to find herself receiving very positive comments about her use of the sling. She felt this contrasted with what she had been led to expect from others in the sling community, where stories of criticism abound:

> I get much better comments than I thought I would. I get lots of people coming up to me in the street and … so many times they say 'Oh look at him all close and snuggled up to mummy, he looks really nice and comfy'. And I never get people saying … 'Isn't he big enough to get down? You are going to spoil him.' … I have never had anything like that. Just constantly people … saying like, 'Doesn't he look nice and comfy?' (Mair[2])

Yet as Mair's response indicates, many people *do* receive questioning or criticism for carrying their children, particularly from close family members. Claire described a difficult conversation that she had had with her Mum about slings:

> Mum … said to me 'I don't disagree with you much about your parenting but I don't agree with you having her in the sling like you do', which horrified me. So we had a bit of a heated debate about it. She thinks it makes her clingy.

While Claire's experience couldn't be more different from Mair's, both comments are a direct response to the level of physical closeness between mother and child.

This reflects the way in which the design of a sling actively recruits the adult's body into the central work of parenting. Pregnancy, birth, (breast)feeding, rocking, patting, burping, cuddling, pushing the pram for naps and piggybacks for older children are all reminders that parenting is a very physical practice. Indeed, sling users often point out that shoulder rides pass without criticism, despite the fact that they involve close physical contact between parent and child. So why do slings sometimes meet with strong opposition?

I would argue it is important to situate these reactions within the wider context mentioned in the literature review, whereby many of the material objects marketed at families are designed to *reduce* the physicality of parenting (for example, a pram so you can push them rather than carry them, a dummy or rocker so they can self soothe, etc.) (Kabat-Zinn and Kabat-Zinn 1997). In contrast, the design of a sling results in an active and deliberate 're-bodying' of parental labour through the active creation of interembodiment (Lupton 2013) and skinship (Tahhan 2010, 2013).

This challenges contemporary notions of parenting, firstly because it is believed that carrying a child represents a physical burden, and secondly because it is assumed that encouraging a high level of physical closeness between parent and child will result in dependency for the child (the clinginess that Claire's Mum was concerned about). The data also indicated a gendered dimension to these debates as James and Thirza explored in their interview:

> James: Ladies of a certain age … react very differently to a man carrying a baby than a woman carrying a baby.
>
> Thirza: You're right actually that it's not just Mummy aged ones, it's the Granny aged ones who come up to me and they are like 'You're making a rod for your own back' and all that kind of business. Whereas they come up to James and go 'Oh it's so lovely to see a man that carries a baby'.
>
> James: It's completely different; I never get any of that kind of negative, 'Are you doing the right thing with that baby?' It never happens to me at all.

While there isn't space for a full discussion on intersectionality here, it is important to note that concerns about physical closeness leading to dependency and overburdening tend to centre on the mother, in particular. These concerns are understandable as feeling overwhelmed and exhausted is often a key part of the mothering experience (Hall and Irvine 2009; Miyata 2002), and the sling using mothers in my study were no exception here. Many spoke candidly about these feelings, including how they related to physical contact.

> I kind of envisaged that it would be more even [between her and her husband] but he didn't take a bottle very well and … nothing other than the boob was … as comforting … So I'm quite attached to him, we are quite attached to each other at the moment … it's hard being a woman, being the one who breastfeeds, who gestates, you know you have to give up so much more of your life. (Hannah)

Hannah's example illustrates how the physicality of the relationship between mother and child can represent major work for the mother, in particular. This is crucial to bear in mind since slings undoubtedly increase the level of physical closeness between adult and child. Consequently, if more physical closeness really does equal more work for the mother, then clearly slings could be advocated in regressive ways which intensify the pressure on mothers by further raising the bar on what constitutes 'good mothering' (Lawler 2000). However, things are not this straightforward since parents generally use slings, either alone or in combination with prams, because they feel they make parenting *easier*. It was this desire to understand the disconnect between the societal perception (slings are hard work) and the empirical evidence (slings can make life easier for many parents), which led me to reconceptualise parental care as I do in this article.

In the sections that follow, I'll demonstrate how the assumption that increased physical closeness automatically leads to more work is based on a misunderstanding of the nature of parental care. Specifically, I'll show that we tend to *underestimate* the potential range of actors involved in parental care and misinterpret the *direction* of care flows between them. Once we understand parental care as held by a wider network of interrelationships, it becomes possible to see how slings might contribute to facilitating these wider relationships in ways which can potentially lighten the load on mothers and the nuclear family.

A first step in doing this, however, is to re-evaluate the role of the body in parental care relationships and, in particular, to address the concern that a 're-bodying' of parenting will necessarily lead to further encumbrance and dependency.

The adult body cares

Exploring the narratives of sling using parents more closely reveals a very different perspective on the role of the body in parental care. For example, Abi described how the sling made nap time easy with her son:

> I remember going out … with some friends … for a pub lunch … their son needed to go to sleep and they were like, 'oh he's going to be tired … we're really sorry, he's just going to be a bit awkward and a bit whingy till the end of the meal now.' I said, '[Son] needs a nap'. … I put him in the sling and five minutes later he was asleep. And they were like, 'But you never even got out of your chair'.

Here, Abi describes how the physical comfort created as the sling held her son on her body meant that sleep happened effortlessly, generating more rest for her. She contrasted this to the experience of her friends who had to perform the more active work of entertaining and pacifying a tired child. Indeed, she also recognised the contrast to her experiences of parenting her older son (before she had discovered slings) where she would need to walk the pavements with the pram to get him to sleep.

In this way, soothing a child or getting them to sleep becomes less of an active work of management; rather, it is something that the comfort of the body, along with the rhythm of walking, perhaps, or the entertaining views in the street, takes care of, allowing parents to rest or engage in other activities.

Thus, far from 'making a rod for your own back' as Thirza's critics would have it, these examples show how the sling enables the body to be recruited into the parenting process in a way that may *lessen* the work at key points. In these moments, parents often experienced physical closeness as easier for them, since it allowed their bodies to take on some of the mental and emotional work involved in parenting (Whittle 2019).

The child can also be an active participant in the care process as the following section describes.

The child cares

Public discourse around childcare tends to centre on the child as a passive recipient of care. Such discourses often go hand in hand with a narrative of the young child as a burden, as discussed in the previous section. These understandings are 'common sense' on one level since very young children, in particular, rely on (considerable) care work from adults to keep them safe and happy. As a result, while in children's geographies we are used to talking about children and young people having agency, it becomes harder to think about applying this to infants and very young children. However, recent work on infant geographies (Holt 2013) challenges this by encouraging us to think about subjectivity and agency and how far we can stretch these ideas in relation to the earliest stages of life.

Interestingly, this research takes us into exactly this territory by revealing that, while there is clearly an asymmetry between the role of parents and children in the care relationship, children are not just passive receivers of care. On the contrary, there are examples of where they perform some of this work themselves. Once again, I found that slings can both facilitate and make this redistribution more visible so that caring is able to extend beyond the usual suspects of mother and father. Here are two examples which illustrate this redistribution in action.

The first relates to the finding that even very young babies carried in slings give back to their parents emotionally. The interviews were full of accounts from mums and dads of the comfort that came from holding their children. This was a particular theme for Nivedita:

> I've had depression for a very long period of time and I felt that they [slings] were a little bit of a saviour … Because the cuddles and you know you can, if you are having a really crappy day you just sling your children and you are all snuggled up together and it is just amazing. It's just not the same in a pushchair … [when] you are kind of this far away from each other.

This is one way in which even very young children participate in parental care work. However, there are other ways too. In the previous section we explored how help from an adult is often required to enable young children to sleep, feed, etc. and we considered the different forms that this work can take (for example, pushing the pram around the block to get the baby to sleep, or popping them into the sling). Many popular parenting guidebooks encourage parents to take a very active part in managing their child's sleeping and eating by developing a schedule (Bamford 2010). My point here is not that a particular approach is 'right' or 'wrong'. Rather – and in the spirit of countering the intensive mothering narrative which sees the parent as the architect of everything – I'd argue that it is important to recognise that the child itself can be an active participant and perhaps reduce some of the load on the parent in the process.

For example, Clare explained how the sling, which she had learnt to breastfeed in, enabled her newborn daughter to regulate her own sleeping and feeding. This was really helpful as she had an older daughter to take care of:

> because we've already got a lot on toddler wise, that we go to, she just tags along. She's in the sling; sometimes I forget she's there. It's a bit harsh on her but yes she's content, she just sleeps all the time. She wakes up and I breastfeed and she goes back to sleep.

Lynn's experience with her second child was almost identical:

> It sounds awful but you can almost forget you've got them because I think I wore [daughter] for the first eight weeks … I would just get up, put the sling on and just wear her constantly … And it was almost like she was, I don't know, still inside. It sounds weird, but she was just still there but could carry on doing everything.

Both examples describe a situation where, far from requiring active management, sleeping, feeding and comforting seem to happen almost by themselves. As described in the previous section, this most certainly involves the comfort provided by the parent's body. However, the child also actively participates in this process through his/her own feeding and sleeping cues, both of which are easily detected when a child is in a sling (Knowles 2016). Revealingly, these quotes also offer an important

insight into dominant parenting narratives: while both comments were made in a lighthearted way (clearly both they and their babies were very happy with the present situation), they express an element of guilt that they weren't 'doing' more: ('It sounds awful but … ', 'It's a bit harsh on her … '). Reducing the burden on mothers thus involves countering intensive parenting narratives by recognising and validating the active participation of a wider range of actors – including the child themselves – in the care process.

This involvement progresses as older children become active participants in other aspects of the parenting process. For example, parents talked about how their children would express preferences around how they were transported – choosing sling (which type and also carrying position), pram or walking depending on their mood and who they were with.

So far, then, we have discussed the role of the parental body and the child as (unacknowledged) participants in the parental care process. In the next sections, we explore how this relationship can be extended further, to encompass the role of other people and places.

Other people care

Slings are also used to enable others (most commonly dads) to take on the work of parenting. Again, there is nothing new in this since prams have been used for this purpose for some time. Indeed, prams have something of an advantage here since they are socially normalised and pushing one doesn't require new skills. However, once again, reflecting on occasions when sling use was extended 'beyond the usual suspects' revealed new insights about who participates in parental care work.

For example, Claire described how the sling helped her daughter to settle more easily with other people:

> she does struggle to settle with other people but as soon as she goes in the sling, wherever she is, she settles. So with my husband – and my Mum has done it as well, despite the fact she [Mum] didn't really agree with it, she's put her in the sling and she settles straightaway and it's brilliant.

Equally, Brendan explained that his children's nursery had started using it for similar purposes:

> I think there's a kind of growing awareness and acceptance at the nursery … that the sling is … a useful tool and that parents are into it … . So when Fionn arrived to … get him to sleep they put him in a sling a little bit.

Here the work of parenting is being redistributed away from the mother, very much as might happen with a pram, you may think. And yet, if we go a little deeper, we can see that the relational affordances of a sling (Whittle 2019) are also enabling some other shifts to occur. Since a child in a sling will often settle and fall asleep more easily, other carers aren't just doing the fun and functional stuff, they are also taking on this nurturing, comforting, managing emotions and affects role – the function that, as Aitken (2000) describes, is often (frustratingly) attributed solely to mothers. Again, then, we see how there is potential for slings to (a) make visible and (b) extend this redistribution of parental care work which is already occurring.

A related subject is the potential community that parenting practices create when they move into public space. This was something that I observed happening at MBS. While its primary purpose was to hire out slings, we also developed a secondary function as a collective space where the work of parenting could be shared. Some of this sharing was immediate in that parents who had come for advice on slings would often stay to chat, feed and swap advice with other parents. However, this sharing wasn't just emotional and affectual. On our volunteer team, we would take turns in slinging each other's babies during library sessions. This allowed those of us with older children to enjoy cuddles with a younger baby while allowing newer mums who were feeling tired or 'touched out' to relax or do some more adult-tasks such as handling the computer admin for the team. And the conversations and support would continue after sessions into the online space of the chat group that we have for the library team (Madge and O'Connor 2006).

As our library was located in a town centre café at the time of the research, the community which developed around us also extended to the staff and regulars of the café. This community was very diverse since the café had been designed as a welcoming space for all – many of the volunteers who helped run the café had learning difficulties, and some of the regular customers were a number of older people who lived in the sheltered housing next door. These familiar faces became part of our world: everyone liked seeing the babies grow and this formed an important point of connection and mutual support between us, despite our very different life circumstances. All of this changed the affectual atmosphere of the café and made it feel even more like a supportive and welcoming space that we would visit, not only during sling meets but also at other times. In this way, others were recruited into the (parental) care relationship which, at times, was vital in lightening the load.

In the final section, we'll extend these discussions further to explore the ways in which parental caring may extend beyond human actors.

More than human care

As explained in the literature review, feminist literatures have begun to explore the role of non-human objects in parenting. This research supports and extends these conclusions by using materiality to rethink the parental care process itself. Let's return to two examples discussed previously in order to add a deeper level to the analysis.

Firstly, both the interviews and my own experiences of carrying my son revealed that it is not just the presence of the adult's body which offers feelings of safety and comfort to the child. Instead, the fabric of the sling itself is a crucial part of this care relationship, offering a sense of security and containment. For example, parents would talk a lot about the 'feel' of different slings – not only in terms of comfort and practicality for them but also in terms of the experience that it offered for their children. Here Claire talks about how the stretchy wrap (a long length of stretchy fabric, often used to carry newborns and very young babies) gave a greater feeling of closeness than a buckle carrier:

> I had the stretchy first … it's just so comfy and they're so close, it just feels like they are kind of, well, [more] part of your body than a buckle [carrier]. I don't know, it just feels more natural.

Equally, parents with access to more than one sling described how they would choose different ones for different purposes. For example, there were quicker and more functional types of carry[3] used for everyday convenience while softer fabrics or more 'enclosed' kinds of carry would often be chosen if a child needed sleep or comforting. Consequently, the sling itself plays a crucial role in achieving the experience of interembodiment described by Lupton (2013) – reflected in Claire's comment that it feels like the child becomes part of your body. Thus the materiality of the sling, too, plays an important role in parental care relationships.

I also want to give a very different example which relates to the wider landscapes within which our lives are played out. Parents and children are constantly interacting with particular spaces and places. These wider landscapes are rich and multi-dimensional, not only in terms of their tangible physical qualities (hot, cold, quiet, noisy, etc.) but also in their emotional and affectual resonance (Anderson 2009).[4] These wider qualities of place clearly had an impact on the experiences of parents and children since the interviews revealed that particular environments – and the movement of parent and child through them – could be experienced as variously exciting, scary, calming, etc.

For example, the Lancaster-based café discussed in the previous section became experienced as an important space of care for the parents and children that frequented it. This was in part due to the human interactions occurring within the space. However, the experience of care could also be related to the material qualities of the space (the adult and baby changing facilities, the toys and high chairs, the amazing cake selection, the level access for prams and wheelchairs, the cosy sofas and the fact that noise and marauding toddlers were always welcome).

Importantly, such spaces of care did not just occur in urban areas but also extended to rural landscapes. For example, James, a keen hillwalker, used a sling to go walking with his children. He described what I would interpret as a multi-directional relationship of care between him, his child and the hill country where he was walking:

> I wanted to share those [hill walking] experiences with my children … And then you discover … how lovely it is spending 90 minutes on a Tuesday morning with … your baby warm and snuggled fast asleep and every time you look down and see those little eyes and you can feel them moving, it's so lovely. All of that sort of carried on from this practical thing, 'I want to go up that hill over there'.

Thus parental care is not just about the 'obvious' interaction between humans. Rather, these more than human qualities of the environment become recruited into parental care relationships in ways which can potentially make a big difference to both parents and children. This insight – that care involves a complex web of humans and more than humans, where giving and receiving flow back and forth at different times – is what I develop in the final section of the article.

Conclusion: towards a new understanding of parental care

This study argues for the importance of thinking differently about *who* cares in parenting. I have shown that slings both make visible and facilitate the recruitment of a wider range of actors into parental care relationships, thus countering the intensive mothering discourse which see the mother as responsible for almost everything. For example, I have shown that sling design, which enables the physical body to take on a role in settling the child, allows other adults to take on the 'nurturing' work which is often seen to be the preserve of the mother. We have also seen how a sling's design can make visible – and facilitate – the way that children themselves become active participants in the parental care relationship.

These findings are important, not only because they provide a different, broader answer to the question of who cares, but also because they enable us to challenge (limiting) assumptions about what mothers, fathers and children are and do. For example, our understanding of very young children is transformed through recognition of the way in which infants also have agency and actively participate in parental care relationships (Holt 2013).

This research has also emphasised the role that non-humans play in relationships of care. This is important as it brings insights from more than human and phenomenological scholarship into our understanding of care. Specifically, we see how places are not just an irrelevant backdrop to human lives but active participants that 'give back' as part of the care process. Of course, politically it also adds weight to research calling for equality of access to public spaces for all, including children and families and differently abled bodies (Clement and Waitt 2018; Davies 2018; Pyer and Tucker 2017; McDowell 1993).

While slings make the widening of care relationships visible, they are not the sole architects of this process as there are many ways to create similar effects (for example, we've seen that prams can be very useful in enabling other adults to play an active role in childcare). However, the design affordances of slings – in particular their involvement of the body – means that they are well placed to facilitate some of these changes. Equally, their ability to overcome the mobility challenges faced by young families results in parents and children being brought out of the home into a wider range of public spaces (Whittle 2019). This, in itself, makes parental care work a public practice and creates possibilities for enlisting other people and places into the parental care relationship.

Importantly, however, the conclusions of this article challenge not only *who* cares but also *how* these care relationships function. As outlined in the literature review, dominant assumptions of parental care are premised on adults (most particularly mothers) as active givers of care, with children as passive receivers who are dependent upon their adult carers. Under this intensive mothering model, the goal of the mother, in particular, is to train children to become independent adults. However, this research shows that not only do we have a wider range of *participants* in the care process, we also see that the *direction of participation* in these networks is dynamic and multiway.

For example, throughout the article we have seen examples of how adults, children and non-humans give and receive at different times. In this way, we see how inadequate notions of 'dependence' and 'independence' are as a way of understanding human relationships. Rather, it feels like feminist models of interdependence (where needs are normal and we understand ourselves as inextricably connected to other humans and non-humans with flows of give and take at various times; Guenther 2006) constitute a more helpful way of conceptualising parental care.

In making these points I do not mean to ignore contemporary reality in which parental care work continues to be born strongly by mothers. I also do not want to gloss over the many power dynamics and oppressions resulting from the intersection of a whole host of factors such as class, race, and gender, which will mean that the experience of mothering will be experienced very differently across time and space (Johnson and Johnston 2019). Rather, in sketching out this alternative way of conceptualising and practicing parental care relationships, my goal is to look for the seeds of transformation in the present and draw attention to the possibility for things to be otherwise (Latour 2003, 2010). Doing so will, I hope, make it possible to develop more supportive parenting cultures in future.

Notes

1. For a fuller description of the methods used, please see (Whittle 2019).
2. Some names are pseudonyms and others real names in accordance with the wishes of the participants.
3. A 'carry' refers to different ways in which a woven wrap can be tied to offer a different experience for adult and child.
4. I have broken it down in this way for ease of explanation yet, following phenomenology and more than human literatures, none of this is to imply an distinction between the physical and affectual aspects of place or, indeed, between people and the wider world of which they are a part.

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