Parental imaginaries of a low-tech past and a hi-tech future: an interview with Sonia Livingstone
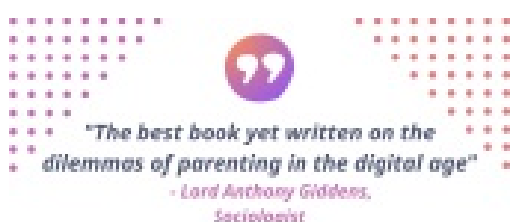

Sonia Livingstone was interviewed by Ashley McDermott, University of Michigan, for CaMP Anthropology.

Ashley McDermott: *Your work looks at how technology provokes anxieties in parents about agency, values, and tradition while simultaneously offering hope for a better future for children. You argue that parents' approaches to the digital are about more than just the immediate needs of the family, but rather parents' past memories and "visions of the future" and that the digital is the terrain upon which parents are negotiating their identities as well as their children's identities. Could you speak more about how family approaches to digital technology became laden in additional meaning? Also, how has the question of technology use in individual families become so contested in the media and a concern of society at large?*

Sonia Livingstone: Lively debates about our digital age, the economics of innovation,

platform regulation, the digital divide, emerging landscapes of risk and opportunity all have, at their heart, and often unacknowledged, an account of how ordinary people are learning about and engaging with digital technologies. But it would be a mistake to take for granted that one knows how people are living with technology, or to assume that others live like we do. One aim of our book is to shed light on the experiences of families, to recognise their diversity, and to listen to what they have to say. Another aim is to link families' stories with the societal processes in which they are not only embedded but which they also, collectively, shape.

"The best book yet written on the dilemmas of parenting in the digital age"
- Lord Anthony Giddens, Sociologist

Prof Livingstone's book with Alicia Blum-Ross is available to buy in the link above!

In 'Parenting for a Digital Future,' we foreground the dimension of time, theoretically and methodologically, showing that parents' imaginaries span a century, more or less – for they readily look back not only to their childhoods but also to those of their grandparents, and they often look forward to their children's adulthood (asking themselves, who will they become, and what role have I in determining this?) but struggle to look further forward than to their children's grandchildren. A century encompasses considerable change – in childhood, parenting cultures, education and, of course, technology. So, asking parents to look back and then

forward was a great way to get them talking, eliciting their ideas of social transformation, their own power to shape this (or not) and, for sure, their hopes and fears for their child. Often, 'memories' of the past are tech-free, while 'visions' of the future are more science fiction than grounded predictions. Even in the here-and-now, tech is foregrounded because it seems relatively controllable (buy the latest kit, learn to code, follow the screen time rules) – certainly by comparison with the many challenges parents face (we explore poverty, divorce, migration, disability). And thus, tech seems to hold out the promise of managing, optimising, children's futures. But at the same time, its very complexity, opacity and constant change threatens that promise, focusing anxieties not only on the tech and children's engagement with it but threatening children's very futures.

Ashley McDermott: *One of the many things I enjoyed about your work was how it bridged so many disciplines in the social sciences, and the collaborative nature of the research. In anthropology, it seems like much ethnographic research is still done largely by one researcher and is grounded in the literature of primarily one discipline. Could you tell us about how the project came about, and what led you to design your research in this way?*

Sonia Livingstone: I like to pick projects that face in multiple directions as a way of enriching the research and engaging diverse audiences. Families' digital lives might seem rather insular, and an ethnographic lens might seem primarily to engage anthropological questions, but for me, quite the opposite is the case. Not only is the combination of children plus technology an explosive one for the general public, but it speaks to multiple debates across the social sciences too. Digital technologies bring the public into the private realm (for example, extending education – and the pedagogy of school – into the home) and the private into the public (for example, sharing intimate experiences on social media, as we explore through the experiences of parent bloggers). Technologies also blur two senses of private by providing an appealing infrastructure for intimacy and care in family life, but then rendering it commercialised and datafied.

As you can immediately see, to understand how families enable and respond to these transformations, we needed to read widely in sociology, psychology, education, media studies and, yes, anthropology (especially the burgeoning field of digital anthropology), as well as deploy different research methodologies. It helped that Alicia and I were trained in anthropology and sociology/psychology respectively, and that we met in the

interdisciplinary formation that is media studies, where it is well understood that one must read and engage with ideas wherever they are useful, bringing them to bear on a shared interest (digital technologies, digital lives, digital futures) rather than to shore up the boundaries of any particular discipline.

Parenting for a Digital Future was conceived as part of the Connected Learning Research Network led by Mizuko Ito and funded by the MacArthur Foundation. The idea of the network was to explore whether and how digital networks are reshaping possibilities for child-led, interest-driven, open and collaborative learning and interaction. A lot of the focus was on the potential of informal or nonformal learning to complement and even compensate for the problems of formal schooling. We wanted to bring parents more clearly into the picture: when children arrive at digital media learning spaces, for instance, we asked: why did their parents bring them, and what did they hope for; and when the children went home, we asked ourselves whether the parents followed up with related activities, and how social class differences might stratify the possibilities available to them. Our research revealed a host of missed opportunities, as educators and parents misunderstood each other, with children burdened as the go-between, and with misplaced hopes in technological mediations also tending to exacerbate rather than ameliorate inequalities, disconnecting as much as they connect.

Ashley McDermott: *I really appreciated the intersectional lens of your book, and how the families you described are carefully presented in ways that do not homogenize the families or their experiences. Could you speak more about the way you wrote against stereotypes in the work and the challenges of working both inside and outside of generalizable categories such as socioeconomic class and ethnicity in research?*

Sonia Livingstone: I confess that there was a moment during the fieldwork when I despaired of drawing out larger themes, finding each family unique in its own way, and struggling to fit our research participants – selected for diversity, after all – into neat demographic categories. But then we thought more deeply about London as our setting: we were researching family life in a global city, one that precisely attracted non-normative lifestyles (for instance, we interviewed educated families engaged in low-paid creative labour, 'geeky' families attracted to London's tech scene, ethnic minority families who found a foothold in London's subcultures and migrant neighbourhoods, and more). Not only did this help us critique standard classifications of family life by class (which is

not to say that our participants' experiences were not classed) but also to focus on the notion of family itself. Empirically, we took our lead from our interviews – who did participants refer to, connect with, or feel distance from. Theoretically, we drew on theories of late modernity, especially Giddens' idea of the democratic family, recognising the transition for many (not all) away from the Victorian authoritarian family towards more horizontal relations of negotiated power and agency. Theorised more pessimistically by Beck, whose focus on the risk society sees families as burdened by 'institutionalised individualisation' as they are neither supported by the welfare state nor by the traditions that preceded it.

Our argument is that digital technologies intensify the dilemmas that arise, because they are so risky, highly demanding, and yet they hold out a fascinating promise of control and future success. For the theorists of late modernity, familiar demographic classifications are precisely what is being reworked, demanding fresh thinking from the public as well as academics. As we show, people negotiate these changes through the lens of the digital, for this affords alternative pathways, values and forms of knowledge which, once explored, can shake up traditional ideas of expertise (now, children may know more than their parents) or hierarchy (after all, those who can code may do better in life than those who know Latin, as one of our participants put it).

Ashley McDermott: *One intervention you make is on the topic of screen time limitations, which you complicate by discussing the complex ways families negotiate digital activities and the varied activities that children and their parents participate in. Could you discuss how managing screen time became the go-to intervention for many concerned about the risks of digital technology and your own practical steps for parents concerned about the use of digital technology? Also, has the discourse around screen time changed in light of the pandemic?*

Sonia Livingstone: Screen time has become the go-to phrase for parents to manage their children's digital activities. We scholars can argue, with good cause, that what matters is not how long children watch a screen but what content they engage with, in what contexts or for which purposes, and as part of what kinds of social and learning connections or networks. But for parents, in the midst of their busy and often anxious days, screen time is easier to observe, and to talk about. We found this disconnect between what parents knew (for in practice they would make nuanced judgments about the parameters of their children's digital lives) and what they said and did (sustaining an

explicit discourse of screen time with their children, even when it generated conflict, or judging themselves and each other for the screen time they allowed, notwithstanding that its meaning is so contested). Indeed, despite becoming a language of shame and guilt for parents, we show how parents use screen time to create moments of love and comfort within the family (playing video games together, family movie night, laughing together at memes or short videos on the phone). After all, for many busy families in late modernity, finding ways to come together, and share mutual understanding, is as mor more important, and challenging, that finding spaces of separation and individual privacy.

I'll just add that the pandemic taught all of those who believed that 'kids nowadays' are glued to their screens that, first, this is for good reason (it's how they learn, get information, connect with others, participate in the world) and, second, it's not enough (they want to go to school, see friends in person, hang out with family, be in the world).

Ashley McDermott: In the end of the work you propose six recommendations to support parents in digital technology use: offering parents realistic visions of children's technology use instead of scare-mongering, providing support for parents that encompasses the digital environment, recognizing the contribution of parents at school, listening to parents' voices in policy making, increasing attention to the design and governance of the digital environment, and ensuring that policy and technology design is based on evidence. Reading your work now, during the coronavirus pandemic, the findings seem especially relevant. In the light of large-scale switch to online learning and lockdowns that led many adults to work from home while being full-time caregivers of their children, would you change any of the policy recommendations at the end of your work or add to your recommendations?

Sonia Livingstone: One of the many consequences of the pandemic, highly interesting to me, is the shift in policy focus from a concentration on (and valorisation of) high level macro-economic and political deliberation about digital technologies to recognising, also, even if still too often marginally, that people's lived realities matter, and that digital policies must encompass parental guidance, ethical digital design, critical attention to education technology, and youth voice. In my current work, I embrace these under the umbrella of children's rights in relation to the digital environment. And I think there are small signs that families' hopes and fears are being listened to.

Notes

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