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## Temporal Imaginaries in Accounts of Parenting Practices: Negotiations of Time, Advice, and Expertise

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### Abstract

In recent decades, good mothering/parenting has been related to responsibilities for children’s brain development, as a means of achieving desirable futures. Yet the ways in which parents engage with neuroscience, and how they value recommendations based on it vis-à-vis other forms of expertise, is not often examined. This paper focuses on these issues, but refuses to reify neuroscientific advice. We are orientated by the accounts of twenty-two caregivers (predominantly, mothers) in Scotland whom we interviewed about the neuroscientific ideas about parenting that they encountered and negotiated through voluntary parenting programs. Our participants discussed broader advice they received (e.g., through books, friends, families), rather than just that associated with neuroscience. In examining parents’ negotiations of wide-ranging advice, we demonstrate how particular configurations of the past and the future were constructed through the interviews. Accordingly, we analyze how these temporal imaginaries help to justify accounts of parenting practices. Constructions of possible (gendered and classed) futures and pasts contoured our participants’ engagements with advice and expertise. Consequently, we demonstrate that temporal imaginaries can play an important role in how mothers (and other caregivers) reflexively develop and situate their own epistemologies of parenting.

### Keywords

### Neuroscience, parenting, STS, temporalities, expertise

### Introduction

Brilliant teaching people about child development. It’s brilliant. It’s great. It’s advanced so much and stuff like that. But it’s…you cannae [cannot]…twenty-first century, you cannae go through it without, like, raising your voice a bit and stuff like that, because your child…you dinnae [do not] want your child to end up like that [i.e., examples of illegal practices already discussed in the interview]. … Do you know what I mean, we’ll have really good babies and that, but when they’re adults, what are they going to be like then?

This is an excerpt from our interview with Thea and her friend Charlie,1 both of whom were mothers of young children in Scotland. The quote encapsulates much of our interest in this paper. Thea and Charlie talked about how their parents and they themselves were raised, including their experiences of chastisement. They reflected critically on how a state-mandated and often neuroscientifically orientated focus on child development, and specifically advice not to raise your voice when children misbehave, does not “prepar[e] children for the world to come.” Thea’s words illustrate how temporalities shape the reception and negotiation of parenting advice, with the past used as a resource in the present to enable potential futures. Based on twenty-two interviews with young parents, sometimes accompanied by a friend or a family member, this paper analyzes how “brain-based” (Hughes and Baylin 2012) and other kinds of advice are adopted, adapted, and sometimes rejected by parents. In particular, and building on key literatures from feminist science and technology studies (STS) and sociology, we show how temporal imaginaries play a role in how parents negotiated advice.

### Background

The relationship between parents and experts of myriad kinds has been a fruitful sociological topic for decades, with the dynamics between private and public spheres—and between the family and the state—of particular interest (Rose and Miller 1992). Indeed, state-sanctioned or -originating expert intervention within family life is one key activity of governance across many nations ( Rose 1998; Lee, Macvarish, and Bristow 2010; Macvarish, Lee, and Lowe 2015; Lowe, Lee, and Macvarish 2015b; Zhang and McGhee 2019). In this regard, psychological concepts and ideas, such as theories of “attachment” (Bowlby 1969), can be used to govern families at a distance as well as more closely and directly ( Rose and Miller 1992; Duschinsky, Greco, and Solomon 2015). The idea of attachment, and interrelatedly the proclaimed future importance of a healthy attachment, helps to orient parents towards a time beyond the present in respect to how they parent their children in the here and now. The future also plays a role in professional and wider public discourses of “good mothering,” with motherhood (or parenthood more generally) configured as a moral project through which women especially are encouraged to see themselves as having special and principal responsibilities for their children’s futures (Lee 2008; Song et al. 2012; Lowe 2016; Leaver 2017; Kromidas 2021).

In recent decades, good parenting—and good mothering especially—has been related to responsibilities for children’s brain development, as a means of achieving desirable futures ( Wall 2010; Thornton 2011). Concepts and findings from the neurosciences have been given particular prominence in policy discourses and interventions upon parenting practices ( Lee, Macvarish, and Bristow 2010; Featherstone, Morris, and White 2013; Macvarish, Lee, and Lowe 2014, 2015; Edwards, Gillies, and Horsley 2015; Lowe, Lee, and Macvarish 2015a, 2015b; Broer and Pickersgill 2015). For instance, Glenda Wall (2010) has shown how the mandates of discourses of “intensive motherhood” (Hays 1998; Faircloth 2014), coupled with neuroscientific ideas, made the mothers she interviewed generally anxious, guilty, and exhausted—always worrying about the amount of “quality” time they could or should spend with their children (see also Budds et al. 2017).

In the UK, parents can be offered a place within facilitated programs where child development is discussed (Macvarish, Lee, and Lowe 2015; Broer, Pickersgill, and Cunningham-Burley 2020). In these programs, parents receive advice on how best to raise their children, and they can discuss this advice with facilitators and fellow parents. A significant part of the advice they receive relates to theories of attachment and/or neuroscientific findings and propositions about children’s cognitive and emotional development (Macvarish, Lee, and Lowe 2015). A growing sociological literature has examined the emergence and form of the policies that leverage neuroscientific expertise to legitimate, sustain, and propel parenting programs (Macvarish, Lee, and Lowe 2014, 2015; Lowe, Lee, and Macvarish 2015a). The accounts of people participating in these programs, however, have received far less attention (Broer, Pickersgill, and Cunningham-Burley 2020).

In this paper, we draw on interviews with twenty-two parents/carers of young children who attended one of two parenting programs in the 2010s (described more fully below). We examine how parents discursively negotiated the expert knowledge instantiated within the overt and implied recommendations they received, from within and beyond the program they attended. While the starting point for the interviews was to discover how parents framed the utility—or not—of neuroscientific knowledge and ideas for parents, our interviewees described far more diverse forms of recommendations than purportedly science-based enjoinders alone. As such, we do not limit our analysis to how parents engaged with neuroscientific recommendations, since this would risk reifying their importance. Instead, we are led by our participants themselves: our focus is consequently on how parents negotiate recommendations of varying kinds through particular temporal imaginaries. By “recommendations,” we mean not only expert guidance but also family suggestions and wider parenting norms that enjoin particular kinds of practices. By “temporal imaginaries” (see Svendsen et al. 2018) we refer to constructions of the past, present, and future that are deployed by our interviewees to justify their parenting practices at different time points.

### Parenting, Expertise, and the Making of the Future

Feminist sociology and technoscience studies scholars have demonstrated how value laden ideas about good parenting are, as well as the ways through which parents, and mothers in particular, engage with such values. Articles often discuss constructions of “intensive motherhood,” where mothers especially are seen as responsible for ensuring their children grow up well fed, healthy, and happy. Research from sociologists concerned with what, and how, children are fed provides a key example. Heteronormative assumptions underlie food practices, as in wider parenting ideologies and activities (Glabau 2019). A narrative of “breast is best,” for instance, is part of public discourse in a range of nations and seeks to enjoin the breastfeeding of infants. Researchers have demonstrated, though, that despite strong moral connotations, this imperative can be deeply contested (Wall 2001; Knaak 2010; Ryan, Bissell, and Alexander 2010). In relation to older children, parents have also been shown to navigate sometimes conflicting ideas about what and how much children (should) eat, and accounts of parents’ engagements with these debates and recommendations have been widely explored (Bell, McNaughton, and Salmon 2009; Keenan and Stapleton 2010; O’Key and Hugh-Jones 2010; Lupton 2011). Gendered labor is also apparent in relation to food allergies, for example, and the work of keeping the household “pure” (Glabau 2019).

Constructions of the future are commonly inscribed in ideas about parenting, relating to, for instance, the health and well-being of children as they become adolescents, adults, and perhaps parents themselves. The future is taken into account within sociological articles on intensive parenthood, where it is presented by participants as a looming figure always implicated in present actions—making for particularly anxious parents (Wall 2010). A subset of sociological scholarship on parenting takes even more explicit account of temporality within parenting ideas and practices. Particularly noteworthy for our purposes is Abigail Knight et al.’s (2014) article on temporalities in family food practices, including intergenerational alignments and differences in what children should eat. The authors show how childhood food memories influence the way parents raise their children, as well as how such memories are recast in light of current parenting practices. The work of Mary Jane Kehily and Rachel Thomson (2011) is another case in point. By following two pregnant women through to the birth and the early years of their children, the authors analyze the temporal and intergenerational processes at play in how parenting identities and practices are formed.

In this paper, we take cues from sociological and wider work on mothering and parenting practices that deals implicitly or explicitly with temporality; yet we follow a slightly different analytic path via our engagement with STS. As one focal point, we draw on the sociology of scientific and technological expectations. Research in what is usually abbreviated as “the sociology of expectations” (Brown and Michael 2003) is concerned with how framings of the future—and sometimes the past (Morrison 2012)—are reconfigured through current practices, and how constructions of possible futures serve to justify present decisions or enjoin particular near-term actions. In this respect, sociologists have argued that “analyzing the dynamics of expectations is a key element in understanding scientific and technological change” (Borup et al. 2006, 286). Expectations, then, orient present discursive and material practices towards (assumptions about) particular futures; in the process, they sometimes enjoin the re-accounting of past experiences to help justify or bring about these future orientations (Arribas-Ayllon, Bartlett, and Featherstone 2010; Brosnan 2011).

In addition to work self-described as the sociology of expectations, we take cues from related scholarship on science which considers the future in parenting reflections and practices. Most notably, we are inspired by Louise Whiteley et al.’s (2017) study involving interviews with parents of children diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). The parent respondents were asked about their perspectives on both brain scans and genetic tests in relation to OCD. In the analysis, the authors illustrate the “time-travelling talk” of their respondents, where “the past influences our evaluation of the present and attitude to the future; the developing present affects our remembrance of the past” (Whiteley et al. 2017, 475). Specifically, Whiteley and colleagues’ respondents reflected on futures “they might have wanted in the past” (479), and where different ways of understanding OCD (e.g., as a brain disorder) co-constitute the futures parents see available for their children and for themselves. Whiteley et al.’s research also clearly outlines some of the temporal negotiations that parents engage in when assessing expert knowledge. These include how scientific knowledge is assessed in relation to other forms of knowledge, be it clinical or experiential. Moreover, knowledge was crucially adjudicated by Whiteley and colleagues’ participants to fit their circumstances and hopes at that moment: “whether a particular form of knowledge was admitted into the journey…can depend on whether its positive or negative affordances were a better match to the concrete circumstances of the journey” of parents and their children diagnosed with OCD, and wider family circumstances (489).

Along similar lines, Maria Kromidas (2021) has analyzed how her parent respondents in the United States enjoined, and configured, their own childhood memories in how they negotiated scientific and cultural norms relating to raising their children. For instance, some mothers reacted to North American norms of middle-class parenting (e.g., full, hectic children’s schedules containing club meetings and extracurricular lessons and activities) by drawing on a configuration of their own stress-free childhood. This idealized image then enabled them to argue that such middle-class parenting norms do not make their children happy. As such, imagined pasts play a role in how parents treated their children in the present and how they imagined their futures.

In light of this scholarship, we draw on and further develop the concept of temporal imaginaries. Situated within the sociology of expectations, the sociology of the future, and the sociology of time, Mette Svendsen et al. define temporal imaginaries as “the temporal horizon that our interlocutors step into and that become decisive for how personhood should be stimulated or eroded in the ambiguous zone between life and death” (2018, 23). The work of Svendsen and colleagues focuses on care practices in a neonatal intensive care unit, a laboratory using pigs for research purposes, and a dementia ward. In all three settings, the authors examine the ways in which temporalities play a role in how newborns, piglets, and people with dementia are spoken about and cared for (see also Svendsen 2015). In the work of Svendsen et al. (2018), then, temporal imaginaries are intimately connected to the notion of care, both in research and healthcare contexts. Building on their definition and analysis, as well as the sociology of expectations referred to above, in our paper we see temporal imaginaries as sociotechnical, discursive constructions of the past and the future that drive and justify action in the present.

We take insights from the literatures summarized above as part of our efforts in this paper to layer further empirical specificity around parents’ engagements with the recommendations of different types of experts, including the experiential expertise of their own parents. As we will demonstrate, the futures inscribed in recommendations were salient in shaping how parents responded to advice (e.g., whether they were receptive to it and framed it as actionable, or were more critical of it). Our focus is, consequently, on how parents see, first, the recommendations that they deem as (un)likely to help their children, and second, the world as it was, as it is, and what it might be—and how these all constructions articulate with and substantiate each other.

### Methods

This research formed part of a larger project that sought to better understand the social dimensions of neuroscience, and in particular its role in shaping policies about, services for, and personal experiences of family life. Part of the research involved semi-structured interviews with twenty-two mothers and other parents/carers of young children. These interviews covered experiences of raising children, recommendations and parenting ideas encountered, and the place of the parenting programs (see below) in participants’ experiences of and thinking about raising children.2

Respondents were recruited through one of two parent programs in which they had participated (Broer, Pickersgill, and Cunningham-Burley 2020).3 The programs had the overall aim of supporting parents in raising healthy, happy children. One was delivered through primary schools and through general parenting support centers; the other was only delivered through a UK children’s charity and took place in general parent or community support centers. In their content, both programs explicitly mentioned ideas from neuroscience and theories of attachment. Across the two programs, facilitators would talk about the importance of attachment and how to forge bonds with children in ways that “build healthy brains.”4

The target groups of the programs were broad in relation to the age and socioeconomic status of participants. We aimed to reflect this in our interview sample. Moreover, we asked all participants if they knew of someone who might wish to participate in the interview with them. Depending on their situations and preferences, interviews with program attendees sometimes included the partner of the program attendee, their own mother or grandmother, a friend of the family, or a support worker. In all cases, friends and support workers were other women, and partners were men. Ten of the interviews included at least two participants; twelve were conducted solely with a program attendee. Three of the attendee participants were fathers; additionally, in three other interviews the father was present as a second respondent. One interview was conducted with a carer, who was the grandfather of the child for whom he had custody. Our initial aim had been to recruit a more mixed sample in terms of gender; however, most of the people participating in the parenting programs and responding to our interview invitation were mothers.

Our sample was purposefully broad with respect to the economic circumstances in which participants raised their children. As ideas encapsulated in “intensive motherhood” generally, and neuroscientific knowledge on parenting more specifically, have often been linked to so-called middle-class values (Macvarish, Lee, and Lowe 2014), we deemed it crucial to interview respondents living in less advantaged circumstances and through more precarious situations. While our participants’ accounts are, of course, gendered and classed, we are also reluctant to reify social class as a determining factor to account for the rich and varied experiences our respondents shared with us. Accordingly, we focus on how parents themselves spoke of their parenting practices and circumstances, rather than infer any causal links between any of these practices and circumstances with social class or position.

A first very detailed coding of the interviews was undertaken to ensure we would stay close to the data during analysis. In this phase of coding, we paid particular attention to how neuroscientific and other advice was discussed in relation to parenting practices. Within those limits, we looked for anything that appeared empirically or conceptually noteworthy, rather than having a predetermined idea of what we wanted to analyze. Following this initial coding phase, we grouped these codes, in order to explore the overall theme of “negotiating expertise.” Reflecting the wide-ranging nature of our data set, examples of the grouped codes include understanding one’s child through expert knowledge, the past of the parent and the future of the child, the importance of love, the future, normality, exchanging expertise, the emotive nature of expert knowledge, and the changeability of recommendations. Upon further consideration of the data, temporalities involved in how parents negotiated expertise emerged as important; for example, in the codes “the past of the parent and the future of the child,” “the future,” and, to some extent, “the changeability of recommendations.” We saw how such temporal concerns and constructions played a role in how parents negotiated different advice, and we consequently elected to focus on temporality as an overarching concept for further analysis.

As noted, while we were particularly interested in the place of such neuroscientific advice vis-à-vis other advice parents receive/seek out, this paper goes beyond a consideration of neuroscience alone in our analysis of how pasts and futures are talked about and constructed. While our starting point for the interviews was indeed to discuss neuroscientific advice in particular, the interviews meandered through different kinds of formal and implicit enjoinments in an empirically rich and conceptually generative way. Hence, this article does not focus only, or even centrally, on neuroscientific advice. Rather, our concern is with temporal imaginaries and how these interact with negotiations of different kinds of advice more generally. As such, this focus on temporality complements a prior analysis which focused specifically on how interviewees articulated (or not) care practices and subjectivities through a neuroscientific idiom (Broer, Pickersgill, and Cunningham-Burley 2020).

In what follows, we examine how parents negotiated the recommendations they had received and the parenting ideas they had encountered, from within and beyond the parenting programs they attended. We show how parents creatively accepted, rejected, and modified recommendations in their accounts of what it meant to be good parents within the contexts in which they lived. More specifically, we interrogate how their negotiations related to particular temporal configurations, and analyze how these constructions of past, present, and future help to justify accounts of their practices. We divide our results into two sections: “Negotiating the Past” (including wider family life, and historical and cultural norms), and “Negotiating the Future.”

### Negotiating the Past

We discuss here our respondents’ accounts of parenting vis-à-vis wider family life—in particular, their own pasts and their parenting practices as part of a longer family history. We do so in order to analyze how, in different ways and with varying consequences, interviewees framed wider family life as holding significance for how they adjudicated recommendations regarding their parenting practices. In addition, we look more broadly at the cultural and historical norms that arose within the interviews, and how parents situated their parenting and their engagements with advice in relation to these.

Some respondents discussed their current parenting practices in relation to their past experiences and their childhood. One mother, Brenda, for instance, reflected on the wider family context as follows:

Sometimes just things, like, you remember things that you were told as a child. I remember one of them things, it’s just, “the family that eat together stay together,” that’s a quote. So I always think it’s very important that we sit down at a table when we can and eat together …. And that was, sort of, advice passed on I think, you know, my mum and my granny, I remember always hearing that.

In the above excerpt, we can see how certain maxims that informed or encapsulated parenting practices were understood to have been “passed” down the matrilineal family line, with ramifications regarded as positive (see Knight, O'Connell, and Brannen 2014, for a similar argument). However, Brenda also went on to discuss more negative aspects of her mother’s parenting practices:

And then you remember, you still remember what it was like being a child yourself and how you felt and things my mum did that I just wouldn’t do because I disagree, you know, how my mum brought up me and my brother and my sister I think is different from what I’m doing. … She was quite competitive about how we were, how well we were doing at school and things like that. And to me that’s not important. As long as they do their best, as long as my child does their best and concentrates.

Similarly, two mothers who interviewed together, Veronica and Maggie, reflected on the concept of advice throughout the interview, and the practices they had “inherited”:

Veronica: And I think that’s the other thing about advice is that you’re given advice on how to be a parent, but actually you’ve already inherited a parenting style from your parents, whether you like it or not, and that was a huge shock to me was that I began to parent like my parents, and I hated that. … I had to go away and deal with it and sort of unpick it all. Then I put myself back together again in a way that was how I wanted to be put back together, and I actually undid all that inherited stuff from my mum and dad. There was lots of good stuff that I got from my mum and dad, but there was some really unhelpful stuff, and I just decided that I just didn’t want to parent like that. And you do absorb your parents’ parenting style.

Maggie: Absolutely. And that’s another form of—

Veronica: That’s advice, isn’t it?

Maggie: —family advice as well.

Accordingly, we can see that the “inheritance” of parenting practices is not necessarily deterministic. Rather, components of the experiential expertise of participants’ parents can be reflexively and actively adjudicated, reworked, or rejected (see Kromidas 2021 for a similar analysis).

In the same interview, Veronica and Maggie discussed how to navigate the emotional landscape of “changing the family script,” as they referred to it, where each choice a parent makes can be seen by their mother as an implicit criticism regarding how they themselves raised their children. As Maggie described,

And also I think sometimes the friend network is a more helpful network of people who are likeminded in a similar situation to you as well at that time, because you can form ideas and talk things through, whereas if I talk things through with my mum the advice I get back is based on being defensive, because she feels like I’m criticizing, even if I’m not. Like most of the time I’m just trying to work it through for myself. She’ll find because she didn’t do that that’s a criticism.

Parenting ideas and changing cultural norms may prompt parents and their parents to reflect on the past, which may result in emotional challenges such as regret and perceptions of criticisms. This inflects “the advice I get back,” negatively impacting its salience. In this regard, discussions of Maggie’s current practices appear to stimulate her mother to reinspect her own memories of parenting Maggie. Negotiating temporal imaginaries also involves the negotiation of associated affects, up and down the matrilineal line.

Shifting cultural norms and professional enjoinments around good parenting can also stimulate reflections from mothers upon their own previous parenting practices, as well as a reappraisal of the practices of caregivers that shaped their own childhoods. The affects that the negotiation of these temporal imaginaries could animate included feelings of regret. This is expressed in the following quote from Ashley, a mother who, following her participation in the parenting program, went on to train to become a program facilitator:

Some people drop out after two sessions, because it makes you reflect on your own parenting skills. And sometimes, some of the things make you feel guilty ’cause you’re like, “oh, I’ve done that, or I’ve done that before, I’ve said that to them before,” and it makes you feel guilty. And then also, it reflects on your own parents, and how your childhood was.

Very rarely, participants expressed regret about their past parenting practices in response to contemporary advice. Veronica, for instance, described how if she had possessed her current understandings of theories of attachment in earlier years, she would have parented her eldest child differently. Nevertheless, she was ultimately able to conclude that even if she had incorporated current recommendations into past practices, it “would [not] have made a huge difference.” This is illustrative of how, when accounting for regret, a small number of interviewees sometimes produced configurations of alternate futures based on “possible pasts” (Morrison 2012) that could be strategically deployed as repair work within their narratives of being a (good) parent (see:Kromidas 2021 for a similar analysis).

Another mother, Jane, also built up a picture of the past that she used to account for the choices she made. She felt current cultural norms did not sufficiently address the history of humanity, which she wanted to learn from and partly base her parenting practices upon. For example, Jane thought positively about co-sleeping with her children, something that many of the other study participants were more hesitant about, and she also breastfed longer than is common in the UK. In the excerpt below, she talks about breastfeeding:

Interviewer (I): So I noticed that you said that you are breastfeeding [youngest child], and I thought that that was longer than people usually would breastfeed their child, isn’t it?

Jane: Yeah.

I: So that’s part of the philosophy, then, that you breastfeed as long as possible?

Jane: Yeah. Yeah. For example, [at her work], I’ll be sitting next to people saying, “isn’t it terrible, they’re breastfed till they’re, I don’t know, two, three.”

I: They’re saying it’s terrible?

Jane: Yeah. So it’s not a cultural norm. Whereas, I take heart from more things like anthropological studies, and thinking about the long pre-human, um, about the long human history, and that we’re a blip.

This sense of history has allowed Jane “to do what I want to do. Because I understand that the conditions we’re living in, and the societal pressures, are very much of the moment.” While in general she reflected that the program in which she participated resonated with her own parenting philosophy, at times Jane thought “that I perhaps was more radical, more, if you like, if it was a continuum, further along it, than sometimes the course was.” As an example, she noted that where the program facilitator told participants that it is better to reward than to punish children, she argued that the word “no” should not be used at all in parenting, and she thought current parenting ideas were at times rather “Victorian.” We can see, then, that this interviewee actively constructed a certain idea of historical parenting practices, assigning value to some of these over others. She then used them to negotiate any recommendations she received, and the cultural norms embedded in such recommendations and parenting practices.

To summarize, parents relied on different constructions of present and past to negotiate parenting recommendations and what they regarded as wider norms, and to legitimize their own practices. Some mothers also reflected on the emotional challenges that could result from consciously deviating from “inherited” practices of family or cultural norms. In the next section, we look at what kinds of futures were entailed in negotiations of expert knowledge and of wider norms and recommendations. This includes attention to instances where parents might have a different idea of what they want for the future of their children than that inscribed within expert discourse.

### Negotiating the Future

Visions of and hopes for the future constituted one reason why many parents suggested they wanted to participate in the parenting program from which we recruited for our study. These visions mostly related to their children’s futures and only implicitly to their own, for example, through accounts of how they would feel about certain future outcomes for their children. Ashley, for instance, talked about how the parenting program had helped her to give her children the best chance not to “grow[…] up, like, unhappy, and you don’t want your child growing up without social skills.” Later in the interview she talked about this in relation to brain development:

But it's important to know how a child's brain develops is all to do with how you...what you put in is what you get out. So the more time, and the more nurture you give your child, the better it will be. Like a seed—you plant a seed, and you give it no water, and no light, it will die and wither away. If you give it life, you feed it, you water it, you give it loads of sunlight, and fresh air, go outside, and if you put it outside, it will grow into a massive tree.

When asked how she felt about this idea of being able to influence her children’s brain development, Ashley elaborated,

I feel relieved, because I know that I can give them the best I can, and I can try and do the best I can. And having this knowledge to be able to deliver the best I can, that's the best bit. It’s be[ing] able to know that this is what's wrong, and this is why they're doing certain things, and this is why they're behaving that way.

Hence, the neuroscientific notions encoded within the expertise deployed through the program was imbricated within, among other respondents, Ashley’s understandings of her parenting practices and the specific orientation of these towards ensuring a healthy, happy future. In her account, neuroscientific concepts can be seen as a sensitizing concept to think about the developing child, as a route to a different kind of metaphor: an oft-used botanical one, where children are presented as seedlings, and within which parental nurturance is valourized.5 The result of this metaphorical translation is that rather than as a form of pressure (Wall 2010), Ashley described neuroscientific knowledge as producing an experience of “relief.”

Another participant, Veronica, reflected on how participating in a parenting program gave her the “space to think about how you already were a parent and how you could, how you could do things differently with a more positive outcome for you and your child.” In this way, the parenting programs acted as forums within which parents were exposed to different kinds of credentialed and experiential expertise (including from other parents), and parents reflexively (re)considered present and future parenting practices in light of this. These reflexive considerations entailed shifting visions of children’s—and, to a lesser extent, parental—futures.

While parenting programs were one source of parenting knowledge discussed by our respondents, other sources also figured in their accounts. Jane, for instance, noted a book that helped her to deal with issues such as sibling rivalry, as her oldest son was “going through quite a long, difficult stage of being jealous” of her youngest child. In her telling, this book provided Jane with a “script” to deal with jealousy and aggression in a way that “is empowering for everybody,” and did not, for instance, encourage forcing her oldest son to apologize for confrontational acts. Jane linked this script to a robust vision for the future, relating to very broad results:

There’s a lot that I believe is very much all tied up, a lot of sort of society's bigger problems […such as] education, health, all the big ones, everything. The way that we talk to each other, happiness. Even, it can even take it more to things like climate change, and like, if we felt confident in ourselves, then we'd be able to build stronger communities, you know, it would just have all these wonderful repercussions.

Thus, Jane expressed a political imaginary in which responsible parents can help shape the future not just for their own children but for everyone. Jane was the only respondent that explicitly linked the way she raised her children to an imaginary of the future for society in general.

In a different way, Thea and Charlie, the two mothers with whom we opened this paper, were concerned that the recommendations received in the parenting program they had participated in did not sufficiently address the hardships they saw as laying ahead of their children. They discussed how the emphasis on children’s needs within parenting programs is not necessarily unwarranted or undesirable, but that it nevertheless does not always prepare children well for the future. The two friends talked about how they and their parents were raised, including how their parents “got the belt” as a punishment, and how they themselves would not speak rudely to their parents while parents nowadays were advised not to raise their voices to children. Thea gave the example of one of their friends whose “neighbor complained, so she [the friend] had to go to a class on why you can’t shout at your child,” and continued to discuss contemporary parenting ideas:

We want children to be happy and stuff like that, but they’re taking liberties. Like, they’re just…they’re letting them run riot and it is going to be worse in twenty years’ time, because everybody’s going to be taking drugs and it’s not going to be a big deal and …, nobody’s got any authority any more, ’cause your mum…you cannae have authority at home, then…and there’s no authority out and about, do you ken [know] what I mean, then what are you meant to do? Nobody’s going to be able to control their kids because we cannae hit…smack bums. You can’t fret on them. You can’t shout at them. … And I’m like, that’s great. That’s great for them now. Like, brilliant. Do you know what I mean, we’ll have really good babies and that, but when they’re adults, what are they going to be like then? And they’re trying to say that they’re growing into better individuals and that. And I’m like, well the world’s a lot worse now. But I cannae do…they never had all these bums, people not working, people on so much drugs, like, killing people and stuff like that back…and those people were terrified, like, I’m not going to do that. If my mum finds out, I’m going to get a foot up the arse, ken [do you know] what I mean?

Thus, temporal configurations of imagined pasts and anticipated futures can serve to legitimate current parenting practices that are regarded as having contextual salience within parents’ lives, and hence delegitimize the recommendations received in various parenting programs. In line with Kromidas (2021), we could analyze this as parents drawing on an image of their own childhood and the future that childhood enabled for them, in order to think about the present and the future of their own children, or “to shape how children’s past will shape their futures” (Kromidas 2021, 49). The construction of such temporal imaginaries within Thea and Charlie’s talk can also be regarded as a reaction to some of the middle-class norms that are imbued within anglophonic brain-based parenting advice (Edwards, Gillies, and Horsley 2015).

Other interviewees—in particular, some of the fathers—appeared to feel less able to negotiate the future. Two of them did not have shared custody of their children and were not allowed to see much of them. For instance, Mark was permitted to see his daughter with supervision for a couple of hours per week. He did not complete the parenting program because he “missed too much of it to pass.” In the interview, he asked, rhetorically, “Why do I need a bit of paper to tell me…to tell somebody that I ken [know] how to raise a child with confidence?” He spoke of the importance of attachment for his daughter, without elaborating on where he’d learned of this concept and its import. However, Mark felt that he was insufficiently involved in his daughter’s life to be able to implement the recommendations he had received around attachment-based parenting, which appeared to enjoin some anxieties about the future relationship he might have with his child:

I ken how to do it [know how an attachment is formed]; I spoke to my mum about how to do it and she said, ‘well, if that’s how you believe it needs to be done, then you need to do it, but you’ll need to wait until all this [custody battle] is done,” but it might be too late by then. Once a child becomes two, that’s when it gets harder to form more, form more, stronger bonds with other people without them being afraid of other people.

The capacities of parents to render parenting recommendations actionable and to reflect on, contest, or rework them may thus be impacted by wider factors and contexts that shape parental agency and practices. Alongside other matters that constrained both his and his former partner’s ability to parent their child as they wished, Mark also spoke of how gendered norms impacted his parenting: “society says women look after bairns [children], dad works” (see also Miller 2011; Schmitz 2016). Such norms about the “proper” role of men and women in relation to their children can themselves be read as enjoinments that can be reflexively negotiated and, to an extent, even contested while simultaneously being capitulated to (as well, of course, as being justifications for the gendered labor of childcare).

To conclude this section, we have indicated how parents negotiate the future inscribed within recommendations, which sometimes did and sometimes did not align with their own visions for their and their children’s futures. The parenting programs in particular were presented as opening up possibilities for these futures, about which some parents expressed feelings of relief (such as interviewees Ashley, Veronica, and Maggie). Finally, a small subset of parents, mostly fathers from a lower socioeconomic background, reflected that they could not negotiate or implement recommendations in practice because of restrictions on whether or how they could interact with their children.

### Discussion and Conclusions

In this paper we have presented an analysis of how the future and the past can be cast and reconfigured through parents’ reflexive and sometimes critical negotiations with different kinds of recommendations: from expert guidance, to family suggestions, to wider parenting norms. Parents used both “the” past and their (parents’) pasts to reflect on their parenting practices, and to selectively adopt, adapt, and reject recommendations. This often involved navigating the emotional landscape of wider family life, where advice received was based on—or occasionally clashed with—the experiential expertise of their own mothers. Simultaneously, some of the parents we interviewed critically questioned notions inscribed within recommendations—for example, about the negative future consequences of putting children’s needs central now and shielding them from the realities of life. Experiential expertise suffused the accounts elicited, melding with or directly challenging especially the credentialed expertise deployed through parenting programs. Parents are far from cultural—or epistemic—dopes (Garfinkel 1967), but rather actively negotiate different kinds of knowledge and norms.

In relation to the parenting programs from which we recruited, the neuroscientific advice therein played a role in how parents thought about the future of their children—and, vice versa, what they thought about the future of their children influenced whether and how they adopted neuroscientific advice. When talking about the advice they received both in parenting programs and more widely, though, neuroscientific advice was but one epistemic resource—and was not necessarily the most central. Rather, and resonant with Whiteley’s et al. (2017) analysis, neuroscientific advice was adopted reflexively and pragmatically, when it aligned with specific visions of the past and future that parents had and when it aligned with their epistemologies of parenting. This underscores the findings of prior research on neuroscience and society (Pickersgill et al. 2015), and what we have elsewhere referred to as the mundane significance of the brain (Pickersgill et al. 2011). In other words, the brain is commonly framed in everyday life as a significant yet by no means a dominant actant through which understandings of selves and others are synthesized (see also Coveney 2011; Netherland 2011; O'Connor, Rees, and Joffe 2012; Fitzgerald 2014; O’Connor and Joffe 2014). The extent to which, and how, the brain is significant depends on people’s circumstances and the diverse epistemologies they bring to bear in self-making.

Moreover, even when particular styles of parenting that had been imparted by professionals as valorous (most notably, attachment-based parenting) were highlighted as important, parents were not always able to shape their practices accordingly due to the wider context in which they parented. This was evident in the accounts of some of the fathers we spoke with, such as Mark, as well as apparent through our interview discussions with two mothers who had considerable contact with social work. While the nature of our sample means we can only be tentative about any kind of demographic claims-making, we nevertheless found indications that both social class and gender, and especially the intersections between them, shaped the extent to which, and how, parents felt able to negotiate the advice they receive, and sometimes whether they even received any advice at all.

While we did not only recruit women to our study, our analysis has nevertheless foregrounded the talk of mothers. This reflects their preponderance in our interview sample, which matches in turn the fact that by far the majority of participants in the parenting programs we recruited from were women—reflecting the gendered work of childcare. Our use of the term *parents* relates to the inclusion of fathers and other male relatives in our interviews. However, we are also aware of how the term *parenting* itself can render invisible the labor of specifically female caregivers (see Gillies 2006 for a similar point)—labor that can be especially complex for women living in poverty (Gillies 2006; Mendenhall 2018; Turner 2020; Randles 2021). We thus share the concerns of other authors that unreflexive considerations of “parenting programs” can invisibilize women even as they remain the primary or sole family participant in these (Gillies 2006). At the same time, we remain mindful of the need for the sociology of parenting to continue to push beyond a traditional focus on cisgendered, often heterosexual mothers that perhaps still characterizes too much of the scholarly literature (including our own work).

Our analysis has taken cues from scholarship in the sociology of science, and in particular perspectives around time and expectations (Brown and Michael 2003; Borup et al. 2006; Morrison 2012). This has formed a useful analytical lens for studying how parents construct “possible pasts and promissory futures” (Morrison 2012) to make sense of diverse recommendations, and how they are enfolded in accounts of their own parenting practices. Extending Whiteley et al.’s (2017) analysis of “time-travelling talk” and Svendsen et al.’s (2018) analysis on temporal imaginaries in diverse caring practices, we have demonstrated that temporal imaginaries can play an important role in how parents reflexively develop and situate their own epistemologies of parenting. Temporal imaginaries, as Svendsen et al. (2018) have hinted at, are also a way of caring for particular pasts, presents, and futures. They are inflected by what respondents (can) care about, and in turn they influence parenting or caring practices. The discursive and experiential traffic between temporal imaginaries and caring/parenting practices would be a useful analytical focus for future work at the interface of feminist sociology and technoscience studies critically examining the gendered, raced, and classed dimensions of contemporary parenting advice, and its reception, negotiation, and instantiation within everyday life.

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### Notes

1 All names are pseudonyms. None of these are intended to convey any characteristics or backgrounds of our interviewees.

2 As the literature we cite indicates, there are already critical analyses of such programs, and we certainly take cues from these. However, our aim through this paper—and the project from which is emerged— is to center the experiences of parents (usually, mothers) themselves who participated in these activities. Many of them appreciated the sociality and learnings that the programs provided, and we do not wish to decenter their experiences simply because we ourselves remain more skeptical of some of the normative and epistemic regimes through which they are configured.

3 It arose in one interview (Interview 15) that, while the respondent had been engaged in various parenting courses, he had not formally completed the program from which we recruited: he had only done “bits and bobs,” and hence not enough to “pass.” However, his answers were still relevant in relation to how expert knowledge is negotiated in relation to parenting, and so we included his interview in the sample as well. Another interviewee (Interview 7) was part of a parenting group, but had not yet taken part in the parenting program. Her answers are not included in the article, as they were not relevant for the analysis.

4 For an example of such an approach, see “Five to Thrive,” <https://fivetothrive.org.uk/approach/>.

5 We thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing out the emphasis on botanical metaphors in this respondent’s account.

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