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Selling Sleep: A Qualitative Study of Infant Sleep Coaching in Western Canada

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Keywords:
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Abstract: This article theorizes the experience of using a coach to assist with a baby or young child's sleep "training" as occurring at the intersection of three broader phenomena: the increasing use of paid experts to advise on intimate life; the porosity of the domestic sphere; and ideologies of mothering that impact sleep. It draws on the vernacular of a growing critical literature on children's sleep, which understands its practice and representation as symptomatic of culturally and historically specific demands on the organization of space and time, as well as understandings of the child as a site of future potential and human capital. To do so, it draws on a qualitative study of sleep coaches and the mothers who hire them. The authors conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews with thirty women in Western Canada. The interview data revealed that the sleep deprivation entailed in having a new baby is both a dramatic (and often under-estimated) feature of human facticity and a socially mediated crisis. Paradoxically, the overabundance of expert advice on children's sleep made mothers more likely to recruit a coach for customized support. The advice coaches provided, and how mothers interpreted it, balanced the pragmatic and the ideological, among other things, revealing poorly evidenced but pervasive anxieties about attachment, independence, mental health, and future well-being.

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> I mean, I hear from all of my families how life-changing it is, and as silly as that might sound to somebody who's not suffering from sleep deprivation, it really changes their entire family, it changes the dynamic, it changes how Mom and Dad feel as human beings, it changes the child, it changes everything. [Coach Ronnie]

The transition to parenting that occurs when a new baby—especially a first baby—enters a family is distinctively challenging in cultures where nuclear families are the norm, parents are often far away from extended family and lack access to affordable childcare, and caregivers need to return to rigidly scheduled paid labor relatively early in an infant's life. Women still do far more caregiving labor than men, especially if they are breastfeeding and particularly if they are on maternity leave or otherwise not working outside the home. Of all the challenges that infant care presents, the interruption of sleep is very often experienced as the most psychologically and physically taxing.[1] Babies lack the circadian rhythms that adults normally have, emerging from a period of darkness in the womb into a confusing world of night and day.[2] They have tiny stomachs and require milk to be fed every two to three hours. Even a baby with no health problems will be demanding and unlikely to conform to the existing family sleep schedule. Waking several times in the night to feed and punctuating the day with naps is normal for a newborn. For the caregiver who must wake to feed the baby, change a diaper, or soothe the baby back to sleep, the constant interruption of a normal sleep

[1] For relevant empirical studies at the intersection of these phenomena, see: Hislop and Arber 2003; Bianchera and Arber 2007; Venn et al. 2008; Chatzitheochari and Arber 2012; Doering 2013; Kalil et al. 2014; Lowson and Arber 2014; DePasquale et al. 2019; Costa-Font and Flèche 2020; Tan et al. 2022.

[2] A "circadian rhythm" is the timing of the body's internal 24-hour clock that regulates, among other processes, sleep intervals.

cycle typically leads to sleep deprivation—often severe—which comes with its own sequelae for adults: cognitive depletion, emotional lability, poor judgment, memory loss, diminished motor skills, physical aches and pains, incompetence in performing previously easy tasks, and sometimes depression, anxiety, or even psychosis (Walker 2017:305-308).

However, after an initial period (usually gauged at about four months) of frequent feeding and intermittent sleep, most babies are capable of spending longer periods asleep without being hungry, and many can be "coached" or "trained" to do so at night.[3] Despite this hypothetical, many babies and toddlers continue to have short or irregular sleep cycles, wake for night feedings, struggle to soothe themselves to sleep or back to sleep, and expect forms of evening and nighttime attention from parents that are exhausting to provide. For caregivers suffering from sleep deprivation, the task of getting the baby to sleep at the right times thus assumes a priority, as revealed by the vast number of self-help resources available to guide this process. Parents used to be guided by books (and several hundred books on getting babies to sleep are still in print [e.g., Ferber 1986; Sears 1999; Sears et al. 2005; Ezzo and Bucknam 2012; Weissbluth 2021]), but are now more likely to turn to websites, social media groups, and other less comprehensive and more personalized digital resources for advice (Amrute 2016; Gorovoy et al. 2023; Heyes 2023). Into this context has emerged the "sleep coach"—a self-trained or amateurly trained expert, almost always a woman with her own children, who offers individualized advice on the best methods of sleep training and oversees the process of revising a child's sleeping patterns, while supporting the family. The industry of sleep coaching has rapidly expanded across the global north in the past twenty years, and sleep coaches are now a ubiquitous presence in every city and on every social media platform.[4]

In this article, we draw on our small, qualitative research project, which consisted of in-depth, open-ended interviews with thirty women—mothers who had used the services of sleep coaches, and the coaches themselves (many participants were both). Because there is no existing qualitative research on sleep coaching, we started from a grounded theory approach—staying close to the words of our participants to allow the meaning of the coaching relationship to emerge. Nonetheless, our research was motivated by our existing commitments to feminist research frameworks (especially the literatures on mothering and domestic labor) as well as by the emerging field of "critical sleep studies," which takes sleep to be a social and cultural phenomenon rather than solely an object of medical scrutiny (Hesse-Biber and Flowers 2019; Huebener 2024:9-13).

Existing analyses of children's sleep for a long time have been almost exclusively located in the health sciences disciplines (especially child psychology and pediatric medicine) (e.g., Beresford et al. 2016; Task Force on Sudden Infant Death Syndrome 2016; Field 2017; Barry 2020; Bilgin and Wolke 2020). More recently, this literature has expanded to encom-

[3] The term "sleep training" is itself controversial, with some commentators suggesting that it overstates the capacity of new babies to integrate behavioral cues as well as the possible mastery of the parent as trainer.

[4] The vast majority of sleep coaches target their services to families with babies and young children; however, as the industry expands, we have noticed the emergence of other specialized coaching services, particularly for teens (see: Jaser et al. 2020) or for adults with insomnia. Our interviewee Beth, for example, had recently completed a 12-week adult sleep coaching course via the program SleepSense, relevant to her business, mostly because she lives in "a big shift worker town."

pass the historical (Stearns, Rowland, and Giarnella 1996; Reiss 2017), anthropological (Ben-Ari 2008; Wolf-Meyer 2012), and social theoretical (Amrute 2016) perspectives. This latter, critical scholarship is oriented to showing how attitudes toward children's sleep are *symptomatic*. That is, it aims to how the representation of sleep in self-help literatures (Heyes 2023), bedtime stories (Bernstein 2020), or expert advice (Amrute 2016) (as well as its diverse practice across historical and cultural contexts [Reiss 2017:141-170]) cultivates "normative spatiotemporal desires" (Wolf-Meyer 2012:129), that involve "lighting, electricity, leisure time, privacy, sexuality, living standards, medicine, commercialism, education, and changing sleeping arrangements—as well as philosophical conceptions of what childhood meant and what it was for" (Reiss 2017:146).

This article adopts the conceptual vernacular of this critical literature to investigate how it is manifested in the self-understandings of Western Canadian sleep coaches and their clients. Although there is a small amount of existing research on sleep coaches in the US, it is primarily descriptive rather than interpretive, addresses the treatment of adults with sleep problems (e.g., Schneider et al. 2023), and is concerned with their lack of medical expertise or licensing (Ingram, Plante, and Matthews 2015; Mindell et al. 2016; Ingram et al. 2018). Increasingly, it focuses on app- or AI-driven modes of "coaching," rather than on personal relationships (e.g., Gorovoy et al. 2023). By collecting and analyzing qualitative data on the social dimensions of sleep within families with a new baby, we aimed to show how sleep problems and solutions are mediated by social contexts.

We argue that sleep coaching is exemplary of the intersection of three interrelated social phenomena: the introduction of paid experts to advise on intimate life; the increased porosity of the domestic sphere (Hochschild 2003; 2005; 2012; Thurlow 2021); and the influence of ideologies of attachment that are a part of a larger picture of "intensive mothering" (Hays 1996; Gillies 2008; Faircloth 2014; Forbes, Donovan, and Lamar 2020; Hamilton 2021). Where once family members might have provided advice or supportive care, many middle-class mothers in the global north are now alone with a baby in a nuclear family, and have the means to turn to anonymous authorities—mostly via digital means—for guidance. As financial pressures on mothers to return to work outside the home, and temporal pressures to work longer and less predictable hours increase within the precarious, "flexible" workplace, so does the need for the sleep of all family members to be regulated and predictable. Finally, more and more of a child's life is being understood not as simply unfolding, but as in theory susceptible to management, primarily by their mother: not only violin lessons and football are developmentally valuable activities, but also such basic life functions as eating, playing, and, now, sleeping need to be monitored and regulated to avoid harm and maximize a child's potential.

We focus on locating the work of sleep coaches and their relationships with families in these three contexts, showing how the coach represents herself as an accessible expert, both qualified to advise on aspects of family life (especially, but not only, on sleep methods, i.e., *how* to sleep train), but also as someone who is readily available and unthreatening, willing to respond to texts or email, and to provide peer support. Sleep coaching is marketed as an emergency service that can address family crises and rescue mothers from sleep deprivation, but it also relies on tacit ideologies of sleep as a practice integral to re-

sponsible parenting, which can profoundly shape a child's future. It is a service that operates at a pressure point for families: sleep coaches serve as an emergency intervention measure in a frayed area of family life where gender norms intersect with work practices, parenting ideology, the unstable divide between public and private, and human embodied facticity.[5] Talking carefully to coaches and the families who hire them can thus disclose how these phenomena interact in a specific political and economic context—in this case, the context of Western Canada, where incomes and the standard of living are high, yet gender roles are often rigidly upheld, and where prairie pragmatism about child-rearing is increasingly overtaken by aspirational ideas about children's development.

Method

30 women in the Western Canadian provinces of Alberta and BC (primarily in the cities of Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver) participated in our open-ended interview study, seven of whom were moms who had used sleep management services, and 23 of whom were sleep consultants (all but one of whom were also mothers). 13 participants were in the Edmonton area, of whom five were parents and eight were sleep coaches. 11 participants were in the Calgary area—one parent and ten sleep coaches. Six participants were in the Vancouver area, including one parent and five sleep consultants. This study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Alberta, which authorizes research that primarily involves in-person interviews, focus groups, and ethnographies. Participants were found through purposive and convenience sampling: we primarily recruited participants through Facebook and posted digital flyers on "mommy groups" (which generated the most responses). These Facebook mommy groups had thousands of members, many of whom were happy to discuss their experiences hiring or being a sleep coach (or both). We contacted practicing sleep coaches through their business websites, which we found by conducting a Google search. Participants initially contacted us by email, messenger, or phone, and we scheduled interviews for no later than two weeks after initial contact (unless the participant preferred a later date). Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 130 minutes, with most lasting around one hour. Nineteen interviews were conducted in person, five via Skype, and six over the phone. We used interview schedules for coaches and parents that included open-ended questions about how they became interested in using sleep coaching services and/or became a sleep coach. These questions also invited them to describe their child's sleep problems and the kinds of families they worked with, among other topics. These questions were followed up with prompts and less structured conversations. We encouraged participants to choose meeting places that made them comfortable. Of the 19 in-person interviews, 10 were conducted in participants' homes, and the rest were conducted at their place of business or a local coffee shop.

Both interviewers were women, college-educated, and middle-class, much like the participants who had stepped forward, which may have influenced how openly participants shared. Both of us are naturalized Canadians—one Black Jamaican and one White British. While one interviewer does not have a child and the other does, participants seemed eager to share their experiences with both. Those who contacted us tended to be very satisfied with their sleep coaching experiences, often investing in such

[5] We use the term "facticity" in its existential sense to mean the "givenness" or unavoidable and intractable aspects of human life in a particular situation.

services as coaches themselves, and wanted to discuss the value of the role, which has led us to conclude that we likely inherited a significant positivity bias in this sample. This bias emerges in the uniform praise that participants heaped on sleep coaching, both because it had "worked" with their child(ren), and because their business success depended on positive promotion, including overcoming popular skepticism about its value. In two interviews, participants referred to another short-lived sleep coaching business and a friend for whom sleep coaching had not been successful. These failures were attributed to a lack of entrepreneurial commitment and an unwillingness to follow sound advice. We brought a degree of critical reflexivity to the interview material, recognizing the participants' positive framing of their experience, while also interpreting a social context in which basic forms of support for desperate mothers have an outsize impact on their well-being.

25 participants were married and maintained heterosexual nuclear family configurations. Five participants organized their home life differently: one was unmarried and shared a home with a male partner, two were single women, one was a divorced woman, and one person did not disclose their marital or relationship status. Of the 23 sleep consultants, eight participants were full-time coaches, who had worked in the field for between four and 15 years. The average consultant had 4.5 years of experience, with seven splitting time between sleep coaching and other professional positions, and eight citing their roles as caregivers as their primary responsibility. The average age of the participants was 37. Eleven of the 23 coaches have worked or currently work in medical or paramedical fields. The most frequently occurring occupations were nursing and teaching. The most frequently cited reason for starting their sleep business was the desire for a more flexible work schedule. All but one sleep consultant had children of their own, and most said that they wanted to spend more time at home. Ten sleep consultants were inspired by their experience of hiring a sleep coach, and saw an opportunity to build a sleep business of their own. All seven parents were in their thirties: four had one child, and three had two children (of whom one had twins). One parent was a stay-at-home mom, and six were working professionals, of whom four work in scientific fields.

Sleep consultants received training and/or certification through one of the following companies: SleepSense (eight coaches), The Family Sleep Institute (five coaches), The Sleep Lady (four coaches), JammyTime (three coaches), and Mama Coach (two coaches), including one coach who reported completing training programs with two of the listed companies. Two coaches received no formal training. It is worth noting that pursuing a sleep coaching certification requires an investment; for example, the Family Sleep Institute charges $4,800 for its four-month program. Although this cost is far lower than other health- or education-related qualifications gained through more conventional institutions.[6]

All interviews were recorded and subsequently professionally transcribed. Before analyzing this relatively small dataset, we read through the transcripts, employing a thematic analysis approach by noting repeated terms or topics. Although the paucity of existing research led us to adopt a broadly inductive method within a grounded theory framework, both researchers entered the project with relevant theoretical preconceptions. Heyes conducted extensive research on the social contexts of sleep,

[6] https://familysleepinstitute.com/child-sleep-consultant-certification Retrieved: July 30, 2025.

particularly regarding third-party advice to parents about their children's sleep. This work provided a starting point for understanding sleep as a site of parental anxiety where expert advice dovetails with larger social norms and exceeds its stated meaning (Heyes 2023). Tucker was familiar with the literature on the outsourcing of intimate life and curious to see how the explosive growth in sleep coaching that had become apparent from surfing digital resources available to new parents reflected an extension of existing services for managing domestic overload, or a novel way of managing the intense disruption of a new baby. We coded the transcripts inductively by hand, initially reading slowly to remind ourselves of themes connected to our theoretical frameworks and identify novel patterns. We then discussed our findings and iteratively re-read to refine the codes and apply more consistent criteria for selecting our examples. Of the seven overarching themes we settled on, four were well predicted by our initial approach: "sleep methods" focused on the different tactics coaches recommended for sleep training, and how they were received and implemented; "mental health" described the impact of sleep deprivation and disruption on the psychological well-being of parents and how sleep coaching addresses these issues; and "sleep legacies" collected claims relating to the impact of sleep training on future wellbeing (usually of a baby, but sometimes of other family members or the family unit in general).

As feminist scholars, we had also anticipated the theme of "sleep and gender," given that only women responded to our invitation to participate, and we know that the gendered division of labor within families in Canada persists. Nonetheless, we were taken aback by how pronounced this was, with mothers not only doing the lion's share of sleep training but fathers sometimes claiming it was women's work or absenting themselves from nighttime parenting. Some fathers also objected to hiring a sleep coach, claiming that mothers should know what to do, or be able to cope without paying someone else for advice, and coaches sometimes saw themselves as defending the needs of mothers. Cate is a coach and a mother who, at the time of our interview, had her baby with her in her acreage home. She describes the reluctance of husbands to allow their wives to hire a coach:

> Yes. And I think, because I always talk to the mother, and they say, "Let me talk to my husband." So, usually, when I finish talking to them, they are like, "This sounds amazing," and I think they go and talk to their husband, and their husband is like, "No, we're not spending money on that." They don't see the value in it because they're not the ones getting up in the middle of the night. They're not the ones dealing with the screaming, crying baby all day because they won't nap. You know, they can't get the dishes done because they have to just hold their baby to sleep every time they sleep. So, they don't see the value in it, whereas I think the mothers do see the value in it… They [husbands] don't want to help…I know my husband is a little bit that way, too, where there are pink jobs and there are blue jobs.

We had also partially anticipated the theme "sources of knowledge," which captures the different places families turn to when seeking information on how to solve problems. In earlier work, Heyes (2023) demonstrated how the traditional genre of the advice book proliferated at the end of the twentieth century as a response to shifting economic formations and family structures before being supplanted by digital information sources (Owen 2022). Those digital sources are more likely to be interactive and personalized—such as joining a Facebook group

and messaging other moms, rather than reading a book and trying to implement its suggestions—and the advent of the sleep coach is a continuation of this trend for customized advice. We asked participants about why they chose a sleep coach rather than using other sources of knowledge, considering their history. Finally, we did not fully anticipate our sixth theme: the impact of sleep technologies on how families negotiate infant sleep—from the digital resources that they use to solicit advice, to the consumer side of sleep products such as baby monitors, rockers, or sleep tracking apps—and we had not appreciated at all, finally, how significant sleep coaching would be as a viable small business model for mothers who had themselves used a sleep coach. Motivated by the desire to help other mothers, many of the coaches we interviewed discussed how coaching can be done with minimal start-up costs (typically just a simple website and social media advertising), and offered flexible hours and often the opportunity to work from home. We also had not understood the franchise model that now dominates the sector, whereby more entrepreneurial coaches have established training courses and own-brand accreditation; we do not explore this side of the interviews here, but suspect that branding and building out a training business is the only way to make a livable income in sleep coaching.

These seven high-level codes represent a wide range of themes that clearly deserve both further analysis and more research; however, we cannot hope to undertake all that work in this article. Here, we focus on connecting the interview material that is organized around expertise (primarily our codes: *sleep methods* and *sources of knowledge*) and around the significance of sleep to subjectivity (*mental health* and *sleep legacies*). Although the concrete advice sleep coaches provide is typically very simple and available at no cost via other sources (such as websites or library books), it enters family spaces in which sleep has become loaded with meaning—concerning a mother's capacities, a marital relationship, or a child's future. These spaces (and these meanings) are structured by larger forces and trends, including the outsourcing of intimate life among the middle-classes in the global north; the encroachment of paid work into private life and the blurring of the lines between the domestic and the public; and ideologies of parenting that attribute exaggerated psychological significance to the micro-management of childhood.

Results and Discussion

The basic human facticity of sleep and sleep deprivation was a central preoccupation for all the interviewees; however, this facticity is mediated by normative social practices that shape the particular situations in which sleep is experienced. All our participants described the enormous challenge of ensuring that all family members get enough sleep when a new baby arrives. Most sleep experts consider this initial newborn period to be around four months, and 20 of our participant coaches recommended attempting sleep training after that mark. 19 of our coaches stated that for many of their clients, the first baby was the most difficult. Alice shared, "Yes, I see a lot, a lot of families that this is their first baby and they're hit by the wave of parenthood that they weren't expecting because it's so overwhelming and nobody can prepare you for that and nobody can prepare a new mom or a new dad with...no one can prepare somebody for the sleep deprivation that they're going to encounter." Many participants hypothesized that lack of sleep was a contributing factor in a host of health- and relationship-related problems (especially postpartum depression). For

example, Sarah, a parent, says, "I was so tired that the way I described it is that I was hallucinating. I remember not knowing if I was her or I was me. I was so affected by the sleep. Obviously, there's some kind of anxiety and depression going on, too."

The question for parents, then, becomes how to encourage a baby or young child to go to sleep at an appointed hour and stay asleep long enough to allow caregivers to get out of this state of acute sleep deprivation—as a good in itself, but also as a way of enjoying a certain kind of relationship with each other, with friends and family, and to enable them to function in sync with their larger world (by being alert during scheduled work hours, or being able to enjoy adult-only evenings, for example). The basic service a sleep coach provides is individualized counseling—via phone call, text, personal visits, email or DM exchanges, or, occasionally, in-home stays. As coach Sonny explains, "I think that it [sleep coaching] will continue to be a growing area of expertise that people use. We live in a society, at least in the Western world, where we are structured to a routine with the times of day that we're awake and when we're asleep. And so, we're going to continue to have a demand for people to want to quickly move their children to kind of conform to those schedules." To give another example, Mindy describes the sleep problems that bring families to her: "I find most people are very irritated with, like, their babies taking a really long time to go to bed at night. So, like a two-hour bedtime battle to finally get them down for them just to wake up two hours later, that's like, probably, like one of, like the most motivating factors. You're so tired at the end of the day, all you want to do is get your kid to go to sleep so you can have like a moment to yourself." And later, "working with, like, that lifestyle of the family is typically very important to parents. Yeah, they're like we can't be home at night at six o'clock to put our kid to bed, it doesn't work, I work until 5:30 and it's not going to happen, right?" Again, the constraints of labor markets structure family life and exacerbate sleep deprivation, presenting a reality that sleep coaches must accept and work within.

Sleep Methods

This constraint of what Sarah Sharma (2014) calls a specific "temporal infrastructure" (a complex assemblage of architectural choices, services, technologies, and practices that enables or constrains individuals' ability to move fast or slow, to manage their time, to be well rested or exhausted, or to have "free time" or clock-scheduled time) dictates the desirable outcomes of sleep training, and hence, to an extent, its methods. Although the common advice, "sleep when the baby sleeps," is not very realistic for adults with established circadian rhythms, in the absence of such demanding temporal infrastructures, it could be a form of synchronizing family sleep by letting the baby lead. For our participants, however, some method for moving the baby's sleep onto a more adult-normative schedule was the whole point.

Those participants who were able and willing to describe in detail what methods they used or recommended to get babies to sleep (one coach explicitly claimed that her method was a proprietary secret, and several coach participants were vague) preferred the "graduated extinction" method, the "check and console" method, and the "chair" method. With the "chair" method, parents sit next to the crib until their baby falls asleep, soothing them as needed, without lifting them out of the crib. Over time, parents gradually move their chair away from the crib until it is no longer in the room. With "gradu-

ated extinction," parents pre-set allowable cry times and step in to soothe a crying baby once that time has expired. The moms and sleep coaches in our study using this method reported cry times of 5-60 minutes. The expectation is that babies will cry less frequently over time. With the "check and console" method, parents check on their baby at pre-set intervals, whether the baby is crying or not. Intervals are closer together in the early days of sleep training and become more spaced out as the baby learns to sleep independently. With this method, check times are supposed to be divorced from crying. In our study, four out of the seven mothers who were not coaches used the graduated extinction method, one used the chair method, one used the check and console method, and one used the traditional cry-it-out method (where babies cry for a pre-set, extended period without any parental intervention). These methods involve a dialectic between an ideal of the child as an "independent sleeper" whose schedule allows their parents adequate leisure and rest (in a world where these are normatively organized), and the dependence of very young children on the presence of a primary caregiver for soothing. They all involve close management of time, using the clock (to varying degrees) in preference to an experience driven by behavior or (perceived) need.

These same methods are also described in the copious self-help literature available to parents, and so we asked participants why they chose to hire a coach (and/or why they believed they were hired) when the advice they give is, by and large, simple and repetitive. The most common response was that sleep deprivation caused parents to become confused and emotionally labile, unable to sift through wordy and sometimes contradictory information to make informed decisions about what to do regarding naps, bedtimes, the duration of comforting or crying, nighttime feeds, and so on. They needed a consultant to lay it out and establish very clear, personalized schedules and tasks, or, as Pam explained, "it's just that individualized special support with something that, you know, could be struggling with and that is affecting everybody in your family." Or as Alice says, "I think there are a lot of good books out there. Do I have a favorite? No, and the reason not is because I feel that a book isn't going to help a mom, and that's where I want to come in, is that they really need the support and they really need the daily support to help, and somewhere to ask their questions." Rebecca (parent) experienced a very quick turnaround in her infant daughter's sleep pattern when she started implementing the advice of the coach she hired: "The first night baffled me, I was, like, wow, could I have done this for zero dollars maybe? [Interviewer laughs] You know, could I have read my book, or just taken some advice, but in books you don't—I can't just email the author and say, help me, right, that's what I paid my investment for. So I say she was the best three hundred dollars I've ever invested in that, because she was sleeping." In this dynamic, paradoxically, it is the over-abundance of expert advice that drives mothers to recruit an expert of their own.

A primary goal, then, is getting babies to sleep the "right way"—where "right" references both the degree of fit with the family's temporal infrastructure, and a method that is perceived to be medically or scientifically approved (and hence "good" for the child's development). Research debates about the best evidence-based medical advice on infant sleep are complex and often unresolved (Field 2017; Paul et al. 2017; Hirai et al. 2019; Barry 2020; Bilgin and Wolke 2020; Mery et al. 2021; Cassels and Rosier 2022). These debates were known to our participants, but only in their most popularized and sim-

plified forms; experts like Richard Ferber or William Sears were occasionally name-checked, but most interviewees (including the coaches) could only dimly recall some books they had glanced through or some websites they had passed over. As Cate explained, "I bought books to read and I was all over the internet, how do I get my baby to sleep longer, how do I get my child to sleep through the night, or different things like that. And I just couldn't put it all together. I knew what I had to do, like from reading these books, like I kind of knew things that I needed to do, but I couldn't put it all together." In this environment, the coach can step in as an outsider expert.

Sources of Knowledge: From Intensive Mothering to the Outsider Expert

This intense concern about sleep can be seen as an offshoot of "intensive mothering"—a normative model from the late twentieth century that drives predominantly white, middle-class mothers in the global north to focus on the rigorous management of their children's lives and thoroughgoing development of their abilities, typically while also pursuing professional work outside the home. Intensive mothering is a way of maximizing one's children's human capital while also showcasing one's ability to conform to a maternal ideal; it is also represented as protecting vulnerable children, who are nowadays at risk from external threats as diverse as excessive screen time, environmental pollutants, processed foods, or bullying. In her pathbreaking work, Sharon Hays (1996:11) argues that this model derives from ambivalence about how the private sphere of the family, structured by love and intimacy, should engage a public ideology that has invaded it with "the language and logic of impersonal, competitive, contractual, commodified, efficient, profit-maximizing, self-interested relations." The expectation is that these investments will yield better long-term outcomes for children, providing them with a future social or economic advantage. This model of parenting is not accepted uncritically (indeed, mocking or parodying intensive mothering is a recognizable form of humor) and, with its idealization of certain cultural and ethnic norms, class status, and family structure, for many families, it is either undesirable or unattainable (Gillies 2008; Forbes et al. 2020). Nonetheless, the idea that mothers wield enormous power and control over their children's futures through the micro-management of their lives, and that even seemingly trivial parenting practices could yield significant dividends later in life, has had a long-lasting impact on parenting culture (Faircloth 2014).

Although intensive mothering also requires tremendous personal devotion from primary caregivers (and a significant commitment from secondary caregivers), it also relies on numerous professionals dedicated to optimizing the health and well-being of children, including sleep coaches, in the twenty-first century. The more traditional contexts for learning how to parent—the advice of grandmas, public health groups for new mothers, or staid books on "the first five years"—are increasingly viewed by new parents as outdated, misguided, or insufficiently tailored to a particular child. The massive growth of digital parenting culture encompasses a vast array of streaming TV shows, online video channels, websites, podcasts, blogs, social media feeds, and discussion forums from which parents can glean information or seek advice. The rhetorical power of the intensive mothering model, with its emphasis on maternal competence and control, combines with this abundance of information to make it more likely that mothers will experience themselves as

incompetent or inadequate, bumbling through a series of challenges without the proper knowledge, strategies, or resources to achieve the best outcomes. As Mindy, one of the sleep coaches we interviewed, put it,

> I find a lot of times now, with, like, having access to so much information and so many books about sleep and babies and all that sort of stuff, everything is so contradictory that sometimes I have no idea what to do. And I could read these books all day long, but I really just need someone to come and talk with me and meet my baby and know who we are so they can talk to you and bounce ideas off you about how you're going to proceed.

The lines between the public sphere of interaction with unknown others and the private sphere of the family are increasingly blurred, including by new norms in digital culture. For instance, mothers post their concerns about picky eaters on Reddit for strangers to reply, or turn to YouTube for advice on how to potty train. In more material terms, more families in overdeveloped countries than ever use daycare or out-of-school care for their children while parents are working outside the home, or have babysitting support from a non-family member (even a live-in caregiver who is a migrant domestic worker). These two features of contemporary parenting—the availability and complexity of parenting information, and the blurring of public and private spheres—contribute to the more general phenomenon of relying on expert strangers as sources of knowledge about intimate life. From personal trainers to decluttering services to life coaches, for every private (whether *personal* or *domestic*) problem, there is someone offering a paid service to address it (Hochschild 2003; 2005; 2012).

These experts are often more available, specialized in their niche service, and more client-oriented than busy professionals in the public sector, such as physicians or teachers. As a sleep coach and mother of three, Laura says, "In the classroom, or in any profession, really, there's always people that you can go to, to ask those more specific questions. Like, you know, a literacy expert, or a math expert, or whatever. I thought there has to be someone who knows more about sleep than my family doctor. Because I talked to my family doctor, and it just, the ["cry-it-out"] advice that was given just wasn't along our line of what we wanted." These experts frequently visit clients in their homes, which, combined with the intimacy of the topics on which their advice is sought, contributes to the permeability of the domestic sphere and the ongoing blurring of the line between the public world of commerce and the private world of intimacy and family life.

Sleep Legacies

Thus far, we have shown the problem space into which the coach steps and how knowledge about infant sleep (and childcare more generally) increasingly comes from outside experts. Sleep coaches in our regional sample were mostly unpretentious and practical, unlikely to reference the more extreme "tiger mom" ideals that characterize intensive parenting among more elite families or in popular imagination. A problem needed to be solved, and, as we have shown, the sleep training methods adopted are simple. Nonetheless, the code "sleep legacies" emerged from the interviews as we sought to make sense of some of the pseudo-scientific claims about the sequelae of various forms of sleep training, its implications for the mental health of mothers and children, and a child's later subjectivity.

Richard Ferber's landmark book *Solve Your Child's Sleep Problems* was published forty years ago at a crucial moment in the advent of neoliberal political economy, and is often (falsely) assumed to recommend a particularly draconian form of "cry-it-out"—the sleep training method that involves leaving a baby to cry until they fall asleep and not returning until a fixed time hours later. In fact, Ferber only recommends a milder form of graduated extinction (the method used in some form by all the coaches we interviewed) accompanied by his stern words about setting boundaries and exerting parental authority (Ferber 1986, see, e.g., p. 89). Literally allowing a baby to "cry-it-out" has fallen out of fashion, although, as Heyes (2023) has argued, its heyday was coincident with the responsibilization of individual citizens in the face of declining welfare state support and the demand that an entrepreneurial personality compensate for increasingly precarious labor markets—dynamics that have, if anything, intensified.

A recurring theme in answers to our interview question for coaches, which asked about sleep training methods (explicitly referencing "cry-it-out" and "attachment parenting" as prompts), was that traditional cry-it-out methods are outdated, blunt, and possibly emotionally damaging (for babies, but also, in some participants' minds, for mothers). Coach Destiny (the only participant who did not have children), for example, cited popular psychologist Gordon Neufeld's research, and told us that a child left to cry alone for long periods of time will eventually be "exhibiting such a high level of stress that it has to protect its own, you know, its brain, its body, and they have to shut down so that they don't do damage really." Born around 1980, Destiny believes that a prior generation of parents using cry-it-out has led to people her age who "all have some form of anxiety." Harper (a senior sleep coach who is heavily involved in professionalization) also had strong views about the dangers of cry-it-out. Leaving a child to cry all night, she concurred when prompted, really fractures the bond between mom and baby, "and it takes a lot of work for them to get that back."

Harper goes on to describe popularized experimental data on attachment styles in somewhat older children:

> And there are even studies for kids if you just don't pay attention to them and they're playing—they're not even crying…There are studies—and well-documented studies about that…You know, like, say, at an orphanage where there isn't enough people to attend to them and they're left for a prolonged period of time. So weeks and months without somebody responding—there's proven instances. There's a record. There's research, and it's shown in, actually, almost every one of the courses I've taken; they've shown the same videos.

In her mind, the forms of abandonment that can lead to attachment disorders are linked to cry-it-out sleep training, and "we don't want to do that. We want them to trust you. They need to know that. They need to know mom and dad will be there for them and back them up. It doesn't mean give in every time." In a similar vein, Avi (coach) claims that "research has shown us that when we leave our babies to cry and not respond, their stress hormones release and that can actually change the formation of the brain," although she also acknowledges that "I don't know the long-term damage of that, to be honest." In an earlier quote, coach Sonny emphasized the need to conform to a socially normative routine, but also went on to represent sleep

training as having a larger significance beyond the pragmatic, linking to medical "knowledge" about optimal child health and human capital: "we really want to get our children to be in line with our schedule and the information we know about sleep. So we want to make sure that we're giving them the best opportunity in life. So if their brain's going to have a better chance to develop if they get the right amount of sleep, then that's what we're going to give them." Here, the urgency of contemporary economic imperatives is combined with individualizing pseudo-science with the mother as facilitator; Sonny's words are both a reflection of a political reality and a justification for forms of childcare that are represented as being outside politics.

Cry-it-out thus served as something of a punching bag for coaches and a source of anxiety for mothers. Medical research on the dangers of the cry-it-out method does not find any adverse consequences for older children, although methodological challenges exist in justifying this conclusion (see, e.g., Bilgin and Wolke 2020). The *perception* that it harms babies and reflects an indifference to child welfare, however, has its own power. As coach Beth astutely points out:

> I think parents fear that it does some harm, and I also think that if they admit to doing cry-it-out, then all of a sudden there's this huge cloud of mom shame over them…I think it's a lot of guilt. You feel guilty that you did something like that, and I think it just doesn't make anyone feel comfortable when you're just kind of sitting around, tense, and waiting for this baby to stop crying. And sometimes it can be hours!

Lisa (coach) concurs: "the two biggest things that the moms are most concerned about are one, feeding their kid, and feeding the baby at night. And two, abandonment issues… They read those alarmist types of things online about you abandoning your child and all of those things. You're going to give them psychological issues." Finally, as coach Laura says,

> right now…parents are too scared to start sleep training… Because society…says don't let our children cry. And attachment parenting is very big…We're going to our babies very quickly, because of video monitors… We see our baby roll over, their face is close to the crib. We go to a place where they must be suffocating. I need to go in and move my baby… Well, then you've just woken them up, yeah. And there's, I think, a lot of anxiety, a lot of fear around sleep.

Cry-it-out as a sleep method, then, was roundly rejected by all except one participant, on the grounds that it created a sleep legacy of poor mental health for the older children and adults that babies subjected to it would become. The appeals to expertise within these claims are unproven but deeply felt: mothers have inherited a pseudo-psychological vernacular for talking about the damage crying at night does to children that taps into a larger set of concerns about attachment and future well-being. The coaches did not seem to us, as interviewers, to be overtly cynical about their business practices (although this would be unstrategic); nonetheless, it is true that if mothers were consistently willing to adopt the cry-it-out method, then there would be a much-reduced need for coaches.

The opposite end of the sleep practice spectrum to cry-it-out is attachment parenting (AP). Attachment *theory*, in psychology, presents a sophisticated account of early psychosocial development that accounts for how infants develop in relationship

with a primary caregiver. This individual (usually, but not necessarily, the mother) may be attentive, smothering, or distant, and hence the child learns that their needs will be met (or not) and develops an "attachment style" that will shape their later relationships and personality. In its original forms in home literature, attachment theory represents "good parenting" as finding a healthy balance between enmeshment and separation; however, in its popularized forms, it represents attachment as requiring constant attention from a parent—quite a different claim.

In terms of sleep, AP is typically characterized by having your baby sleep in your bed or immediately adjacent to it in a bassinet, and always responding to a crying baby (including waking through the night and breastfeeding at night).[7] The Sears family of authors, headed by patriarch William Sears, are the most conspicuous figures in the field of AP and infant sleep (Sears 1999; Sears et al. 2005); Sears calls cry-it-out "detachment parenting" and does not hesitate to make moral judgments about it (Sears 1999:7). All the coaches we interviewed were familiar with AP, and most of the mothers, and while, in some interviews, we detected a little envy (or even awe) of parents who could sustain such an intensely responsive mode of care, in general, it was characterized as overly demanding of sleep-deprived caregivers. In a world where mothers of very young children have to manage the conflicting temporal demands of family life, often work outside the home, *and* have to manage the enormous challenges of acute sleep deprivation, the demand to be constantly responsive to a baby at night, every night, was simply too much.

Resistance to the trials of AP was thus mostly practical, but in a couple of interviews, there were more philosophical objections. For example, Alice (coach) was asked what she thought about attachment parenting, and initially replied, "I don't know what I think about that." She continued,

> as a mom, I want my girls to grow up confident and independent…So, sometimes when I have to teach them something, they're not always going to like that, or, you know, sometimes you do have to just let them go a little bit…When I'm teaching parents how to sleep, I always say, you know, "Feeding is for feeding, sleeping is for sleeping, and cuddles are for cuddles."…I don't want them to feel you're taking that away, and we're not for sure. So, yes…certain sides of attachment parenting… I want these kids to grow up secure and feel that security, but I think it's our duty to make them good people, too.

Many participants were also concerned that failure to teach a baby how to sleep would have negative consequences for their current health, but this concern quickly shifted to concern about the parent-child relationship or the child's well-being in later life. The skills learned in babyhood, they implied, follow an individual, and, by extension, poor sleep practices can have detrimental emotional and physical effects. For example, Ronnie says, "Once we become adults…we're all completely backwards. Not all of us, I guess, but a lot of people…it's that badge of honor: 'Oh, I only had

[7] Mother and baby sleeping in the same bed for any reason was also frequently referenced by our interviewees as unsafe, due to increased risk of smothering and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) (also known as "crib death," or "cot death" in the UK). SIDS occurs while an infant is asleep and is correlated with the sleep environment. Its causes are not well understood, but the most widely accepted advice is to lie a baby to sleep on their back, avoid overheating, and keep anything unnecessary (such as stuffed toys or blankets) out of the crib. Bed-sharing is often understood to be a risk factor for SIDS. See: Jullien (2021) for a recent survey of evidence on risk factors.

three hours of sleep.' Well, science is now telling us that that's killing people, so not so good, right, so why wouldn't we want our children to have the skills that a lot of us adults don't have to be able to have that perfect sleep?" Or Sonny: "There's more awareness now of how…sleep is a pillar of health. It impacts your hormones, which impacts your weight, your thyroid, your sex drive, your happiness, or your ability to think and learn. So people are now more aware, I think, and that's why they prioritize a bit more. We see an increased rise in learning disabilities, diagnoses of ADHD, child anxiety, depression." Many of the participants lamented their own relationship with sleep and expressed a desire to create a different reality for their children. As Beth puts it:

> You'll still have a wonderful bond, and your child will, in the future, thank you for all of these good sleep habits that you've created because they will become a child who sleeps well, a teenager, and an adult who has good sleep habits. And I think that with our generation, now, there are so many people who don't sleep well and who rely on supplements to fall asleep. And I think maybe it stems from infant sleep deprivation, where we didn't sleep well, and we've just had some negative habits, and moms didn't know what to do… So I think if we kind of nip these sleep problems in the bud when they're so small, we're setting them up for their future.

Our participants had absorbed the message that how a baby is sleep-trained could be formative in their later sleep habits and, in some amorphous way, help them get a better start in life. "It [sleep training] takes a little more time on the parent's side, but also for their development, kind of…that development happens in that first year and the leaps that they go through is…there are so many of them, and if you can get them the right sleep, that's beneficial for everything, for their central nervous system, for brain development, for them just in growth in general" (Alice).

Laura told us that parents nowadays have a lot of fears and anxieties about babies in general, but especially around sleep and night. Some of these were fostered by public health warnings (e.g., about SIDS), while others seemed more like intrusive thoughts (e.g., fear that someone would come into the home and steal the baby while the parents slept—"for anxiety and depression that's very much, you know, a flag," as Laura points out). Yet others concerned the emotional and practical aspects of sleep: "that fear of…stuffies getting in the baby's face, or blankets, or, you know, because there's all kinds of options out there for different sleep sacks, different swaddles, different…bumper sheets around the bed… So I think there's just a fear. And fear that your baby is crying for too long. Is that going to affect learning development, attachment, you know, right?…There's long-term effects" (Laura).

If cry-it-out was cruel and crude, and attachment parenting was unreasonably demanding, then one can immediately see how the struggle to find a middle-ground method that would solve very practical and pressing sleep problems could easily be both urgent and confusing. When one adds the moral burden of the imagined long-term legacies of infant sleep practices, the challenge becomes overwhelming. In the face of these multiple anxieties, sleep presents an interesting limit case for the over-committed or ideologically driven parent—different from other parental-child pedagogies, such as feeding, potty training, or play. When 24/7 care becomes impossibly demanding, and sleep deprivation threatens to break a mother,

families are forced to confront the necessary balance between looking after parental needs and being always responsive to their child. Sleep coaches knew that the implied trade-off between mother and baby was a false dilemma driven by rather vague fears about health, attachment, and future well-being, and the "middle way" methods they adopted were frequently targeted at this underlying schism, created by the over-supply of contemporary parenting advice that seems to burden sleep with meaning. As paid experts advising on family life, they were, in some ways, part of the larger social trend toward understanding mothering as a weighty and demanding set of skills, and their excursions on sleep legacies in the interviews reflect this. Their attitude toward sleep in practice, however, was necessarily deflationary and pragmatic—trying to show desperate families how to overcome fruitless anxiety and solve their immediate problems.

Conclusion

The business of sleep coaching has grown rapidly as more families outsource the management of challenging or inconvenient aspects of their intimate lives. It is an industry almost exclusively made up of women, who promise families, primarily first-time mothers, the support and direction they need during a difficult transition. Offering personalized plans with easy-to-follow steps, sleep coaches provide clear and targeted advice, making themselves available in a way that traditional healthcare providers cannot. For many of the mothers we interviewed, the out-of-pocket service cost was an investment in their health, lifestyle, and their child's long-term well-being. Both mothers and coaches stressed the intensity of the sleep crisis when a new baby enters a family, with its dramatic implications for physical and mental health, relationships, and capacity to sustain a household or paid work, especially given that the labor of managing children's sleep is overwhelmingly assigned to mothers rather than to fathers or other caregivers. The crisis of sleep deprivation made sorting through voluminous self-help resources impossible, and our participants repeatedly emphasized the value of having an available, competent expert offering friendly support in a family emergency, one who could provide specific, clear instructions, no matter how simple or self-evident they might seem.

As we have shown, behind the often basic advice sleep coaches provide is a web of folk beliefs about sleep and sleep training: traditional cry-it-out is stressful for mothers and likely to cause long-term attachment or other mental health problems; co-sleeping is dangerous, and being always responsive to a baby in the evening and at night damages marital relationships and exacerbates sleep deprivation (as well as possibly failing to teach a baby the "independence" that comes from being able to self-soothe); a middle way must be found. This compromise method will improve a baby's health in the short term and, in some intangible way, also set them up for a brighter future. Our analysis ultimately reveals the enormous weight of expectations placed on mothers and the lack of personal and professional support typically offered to them in managing the demands of a newborn. Baby sleep is a significant practical issue in an era of demanding temporal norms, and has become freighted with meaning for family relationships and individual subjectivity. Into this morass, the sleep coach can confidently step in with commonsense advice and the ability to cut through the static to find pragmatic solutions to problems that were once kept within the family.

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Is There a Sociologist in the Room? Raising the Sociological Voice in Educational Spaces

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Abstract: Educational spaces are both material and human sites. While people design and build the physical space of educational institutions, these spaces also shape human behavior, interaction, and thought, playing a crucial role in the articulation of discourse. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) in educational research tends to rely primarily on document and text analysis, often overlooking the spatial dimensions of discourse and how social actors interpret the spaces they inhabit. This article presents the use of semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces as a methodological tool for studying discourse in institutions where ethnographic access is limited. Drawing on a qualitative study conducted in twelve Israeli state schools, this article examines how global discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration, which promote an ideal of a future-oriented and self-managing individual, are expressed and interpreted in everyday school settings. Through observations, walking interviews, and semiotic analysis, the study demonstrates how spatial articulations, wall texts, and visual displays work together with educators' interpretations to shape and sometimes contest dominant ideals. The analysis merges critical spatial semiotics with a pragmatic approach to everyday meaning-making, offering a methodologically innovative and reflexive approach to discourse analysis in education.

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Michel Foucault claimed that "every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it" (Foucault 1996 [1971]:352). This perspective has contributed valuable scholarship to the sociology of education, examining both schools and higher education as sites where the articulation of discourse carrying knowledge and power occurs (Ball 2012). Materiality and space carry knowledge and power and are crucial to the analysis of discourse in organizations (de Saint-Georges 2004; Griswold, Mangione, and McDonnell 2013). For Foucault, space is "both a means to organize actions and an outcome of those actions" (Hardy and Thomas 2015:684), as "a whole history remains to be written of spaces, which at the same time would be a history of powers…institutional architecture from the classroom to the design of hospitals, passing via economic and political installations" (Foucault 1980:149).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a methodology primarily associated with Norman Fairclough, which has become a dominant approach in educational research (Billig 2003; Rogers et al. 2005). While originally inspired by Foucault, CDA tends to rely mostly on texts and linguistics, largely neglecting the analysis of space (Hardy and Thomas 2015). However, discourse in a Foucauldian sense is not only texts and linguistics, but rather a much broader definition of socially and culturally constructed thought and practice (Ecclestone and Brunila 2015), designing and designed by knowledge and power in spatial context (Crampton and Elden 2007).

This study takes a socio-spatial approach, recognizing that "the social is spatial, and vice versa" (Fuller and Löw 2017). I follow de Certeau's (1984:117) claim that space is always social as it is a "practiced place." From this perspective, educational spaces should be viewed as both material and human sites. While people design and build the physical spaces of educational institutions, these spaces also shape human behavior, interactions, and thought, and play a crucial role in the articulation of discourse. Therefore, I argue that if we wish to examine educational spaces as "political means of maintaining or of modify-

ing the appropriation of discourse" (Foucault 1996 [1971]:352), we also need to examine their physical settings as the scenery where "human action is being played out before, within, or upon it" (Goffman 1959:13). Moreover, I suggest that merging CDA with a pragmatic Goffmanian approach allows us to study both the articulation of discourse in spaces and social actors' interpretations of socio-spatial semiotic codes in their everyday lives, in institutions with no substantial access to ethnography.

The analysis presented in this article is based on research conducted in twelve Israeli state schools. These educational spaces were selected as institutional sites where national policies and global discourses are translated into everyday spatial practices. The research focused on how discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration are expressed through the material and symbolic dimensions of school spaces, such as wall displays, architecture, and spatial layout. These discourses promote an ideal of a future-oriented, autonomous, ambitious, accountable, and employable individual, and have become part of everyday educational practice in many countries (Ecclestone and Brunila 2015; Morrin 2017; 2022; Alfi-Nissan and Pagis 2023; Alfi-Nissan, Guzmen-Carmeli, and Werczberger 2025). The aim of the research was not only to reveal how space conveys these discourses, but also to explore how educators and other actors make sense of and sometimes contest these discursive constructions in their daily environments. In this article, I ask: How are discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration articulated within the physical spaces of Israeli state schools? How do social actors construct, shape, and interpret these discourses in educational spaces? What are the tools for examining and analyzing discourse in the encounters between a school's "stage," "scenery," and "behind the scenes?"

The article presents the process of analyzing semiotic codes in educational spaces, which involves observing these spaces and engaging in discussions with social actors who design and work in them to gain a deeper understanding of the articulation of discourse in these spaces. By examining space and social actors' interpretations of spatial discursivity, it presents an open-ended, polyphonic discourse analysis that integrates the voices of both researchers and participants within educational spaces.

Discourse Analysis of Educational Spaces

Discourse is a central concept in Foucauldian theory, which has been subject to various interpretations. This also may be due to various articulations of this concept by Foucault himself (Mills 2003). Drawing on Foucault (1996 [1971]), discourse can be defined as both language and practice, which constructs knowledge and power that shape our understanding of truth. Foucault (2013 [1972]:54) stresses that discourse is not merely linguistic semiotics presented "as groups of signs (signifying elements referring to contents or representations)" but rather "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak…It is this *more* that renders them irreducible to the language and to speech. It is this 'more' that we must reveal and describe." Foucault's theorization of discourse offers a critical lens for examining signification in educational spaces, as these spaces are replete with signification, including texts, symbols, colors, shapes, layouts, and designs, all of which carry cultural and social power. From a Foucauldian perspective, these spaces are both shaped by discourse and shape/reshape discourse.

This research employs a socio-spatial approach to examine educational spaces, recognizing that "the

social is spatial, and vice versa" (Fuller and Löw 2017). I rely on the notion that space, as a "practiced place" (de Certeau 1984:117), is always social. To borrow de Certeau's (1984:117) metaphor of space as discourse, "space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependent upon many different conversations." Accordingly, in the analysis of discourse as social language, practice, and thought, the semiotic power carried in the articulation of discourse in educational spaces should be considered.

The scholarship of discourse analysis in educational research has followed Norman Fairclough (2003) methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis, presented with uppercase letters and the abbreviation CDA (Billig 2003). While originally inspired by Foucault, Fairclough's approach has been claimed to be "fundamentally incompatible with Foucault's immanent critical thought" (Curtis 2014:1759). As a "textual oriented discourse analysis," CDA as a methodology "focuses on how language as a cultural tool mediates relationships of power and privilege in social interactions, institutions, and bodies of knowledge" (Rogers et al. 2005:367). This methodology has largely overlooked the analysis of space and has been associated with the analysis of texts and policy documents (Hardy and Thomas 2015). It deals mainly with the use of language, in an attempt to reveal "concealed interest in domination [which] lurks in the spoken word," while abstracting from the way materiality serves to articulate discourse (Keller 2022:38). As CDA tends to neglect materiality in general (de Saint-Georges 2004) and visual materiality in particular (McCullough and Lester 2023), physical surroundings of educational spaces are rarely observed to examine discourse articulations.

On the other hand, the "spatial turn" in the social sciences has stimulated inquiry into institutional spaces in various fields (Fuller and Löw 2017), expanding the understanding of "how linguistic and visual texts mediate ideological reproduction of space" (Björkvall, Van Meerbergen, and Westberg 2023:210). This standpoint looks at "the built and designed environment, as semiotic resources with social meanings" (Ericsson 2023:313), while calling to "analyze spaces as semiotic assemblages where meaning is derived from the joint work performed by different semiotic resources" (Björkvall et al. 2023:210). Consequently, there has been greater emphasis on the articulation of discourse in public spaces using such methods as Spatial Discourse Analysis (SpDA), to study spaces from everyday urban public places (Ericsson 2023) to airports (Björkvall et al. 2023), to Disneyland (Heberle, de Souza, and Horbach Dodl 2020). In SpDA, the architectural structures and the ways in which social actors use these spaces are examined. The method relies on a social-semiotic approach, which acknowledges the importance of context in processes of meaning-making and utilizes the analysis of physical space to understand these processes (Ravelli and McMurtrie 2015).

The literature on educational spaces emphasizes the relationship between space and pedagogy, examining forms of learning and teaching (Sasson et al. 2022), as well as the effects of physical space on student well-being and health (Sayfulloevna 2023), and on academic achievements (Cayubit 2022). The current research assumes that "every social order, every institutional order, every symbolic order of materialities is the result of complex historical production processes where, in particular, communicative elements of action and interaction play a central role" (Keller 2022:39). When I entered the field to examine the discourses of entrepreneurialism and

aspiration in Israeli state education, as I did not have access to ethnography, due to restrictions of ethical guidelines and limited resources, I planned to utilize a critical discourse analysis of the data collected in observations of educational architectural spaces. However, it became apparent that the semiotic analysis needs to take into account the interpretations of the social actors who design and live within these spaces. A critical methodology needs to be "reflexive and self-critical about its own institutional position and all that goes with it" (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999 as cited in Billig 2003:36). Therefore, I decided to speak with social actors who design and/or live within these educational spaces about their everyday sceneries, to allow for a critical and reflexive discourse analysis of educational spaces.

Toward an Actor-Oriented Discourse Analysis of Educational Spaces

Semiotics, as "the study of meaningful signs," can be analyzed in a "top-down" semiotic analysis, interpreting signs through "their social and epistemological context" (Lawes 2019:252). From this standpoint, relying on an interpretive actor-oriented position can be understood as "outsourcing the task of generalization to the informant, who rarely possesses the necessary analytical rigour" (Haapanen and Manninen 2023:419). However, the assumption that people of the same cultural and social context will necessarily interpret signs in the same manner is questionable. Interpretations of signs are not idiosyncratic but reflect articulations of various discourses and thus can be polyphonic and contradictory (Swidler 2001).

Sam (2019:335) claims that Foucauldian discourse analysis is a "top-down" approach in the sense that it focuses "on broader political, ideological, or historical issues as they relate to power and knowledge through discourse." This type of critical approach is dominant in the sociology of education as a means to reveal inequalities, as "inequalities are morally and politically wrong and it is academics' duty to understand these wrongs and address them" (Guhin 2021, 382). For Foucault, the purpose of critique is "not simply to explain the various historical processes that have led to the current conjuncture of why we are, behave, or think in a particular way, but rather…to defamiliarize and destabilize that conjuncture, to explain how it was produced and, by doing so, open it to the possibility of its being otherwise" (Golder 2020:36-37). Accordingly, to initiate critique, which can raise the sociological voice in educational spaces to induce change, one should converse with social actors who design and inhabit these spaces.

Semiotic codes analysis usually focuses on "the codes that define what is possible to say, rather than on the particular thoughts or utterances of individual speakers" (Swidler 2001:162). However, in educational institutions, there tends to be a decoupling of declared ideologies and everyday life practice (Hallett 2010; Morrin 2022). A Goffmanian position allows us to analyze "how context structures meaning" (Swidler 2001:260). In the case of the analysis of discourse in educational spaces, merging the theoretical frameworks of Foucault and Goffman is complementary not only in the sense of merging "top-down" and "bottom-up" perspectives to discourse analysis (e.g., Hacking 2004:278), but also in the sense of bringing forward the importance of space to the articulation of discourse. In his groundbreaking work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) uses the theatre stage as a met-

aphor to explain how identity is formed through social interaction. Goffman (1959:22) stresses that the physical surroundings where social drama occurs are crucial, as "first, there is the setting." This involves "furniture, décor, physical layout, and other background items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action" (Goffman 1959:22).

The semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces examines educational spaces as "political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse" (Foucault 1996 [1971]:352), by studying educational architectural settings as the scenery where "human action is being played out before, within, or upon it" (Goffman 1959:13). The method allows for both a critical semiotic analysis and a pragmatic interpretive discourse analysis of space by analyzing semiotic codes in educational spaces and conversing with social actors to understand their interpretations of their everyday life sceneries.

Discourses of Entrepreneurialism and Aspiration in Education

Discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration encompass both language and practice, which foster the ideal of a future-oriented, calculated, autonomous, ambitious, hardworking, employable, and accountable self (Alfi-Nissan and Pagis 2023; Brunila and Siivonen 2023). These discourses have become part of everyday educational discourse in various countries.

The literature on the discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration can be divided into two main approaches: critical and pragmatic. The former tends to draw on a Foucauldian approach while addressing these discourses as part of what Rose (1998:164) terms "neoliberal vocabulary of enterprise" (e.g., Spohrer, Stahl, and Bowers-Brown 2018; Brunila and Siivonen 2023). The latter draws on sociologists such as Swidler (2001) and Lamont (2019) to emphasize interpretative perspectives on these discourses through ethnographic data (e.g., Frye 2012; Zilberstein, Lamont, and Sanchez 2023). In the sociology of education, the critical approach is mostly utilized to analyze these discourses. Research, for instance, from Australia (Savage 2017), Finland (Brunila and Siivonen, 2023) and the UK (Spohrer et al. 2018) shows how education promotes neoliberal, autonomous, and adaptable subjectivities aligned with contemporary labor market demands.

This article proposes a socio-spatial approach to discourse analysis, integrating Foucauldian and Goffmanian concepts to interpret the discursive practices in-between space, discourse, and social actors. I adopt a critical approach to discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration in education, which seeks to go beyond the linguistics of discourse as it "aims to bridge a symbolic-material distinction and signals the always political nature of 'the real'" (Ecclestone and Brunila 2015:502). In her work on discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration in education in the UK, Morrin (2017; 2022) conducted a critical ethnography, which included the examination of the articulation of discourse in educational spaces and social actors' spatial practices as forms of tactical resistance to these discourses. The current article builds on Morrin (2017; 2022) and presents a process that can be applied in research with limited access to ethnography. In line with critical feminist scholars of discourse analysis, who differ in their methodological approaches but nonetheless

wish to bring forward "the in-between spaces of everyday life" (Morrin 2017:16), the current research calls for analyzing both space and social actors' interpretations of space within a discourse analysis process.

Methodology

This paper is part of a larger qualitative research project conducted in Israel between January 2017 and April 2023. Israel has a free K-12 mandatory state education system divided into streams based on linguistic categorization, which intersect with ethno-national, religious, and geographical aspects reflecting social inequalities. The state school system is divided into Hebrew and Arabic, with the Hebrew sector further subdivided into non-religious and religious state schools. This research focuses on the non-religious Hebrew state school system, the mainstream branch of schooling in Israel, which encompasses more than half of the student population.[1] The research questions were: How do global discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration form and translate within the Israeli education context? And how do social actors use and interpret these discourses in everyday life practices?

To answer these questions, I employed a multifocal approach that included various methodological tools, as well as diverse sites of inquiry and perspectives of social actors. The data included twelve school physical site observations (five elementary schools, two junior high schools, and five high schools), eight walking interviews with teachers, principals, and architects, and twenty-eight in-depth interviews with educators, as well as content analysis of social media publications by ministers of education, school websites, teacher blogs, official ministerial educational programs, and autoethnographic data.

Observations of schools' educational spaces were conducted with the authorization of the principal or during open school visits, and took between one and three hours. The observations included photography of the school facilities and walls, as well as field notes. After conducting the observation, I analyzed texts presented on school walls, following their origins as well as their physical presentation to answer questions such as: Who is quoted? How and where are they quoted? Why are they quoted? This analysis was performed in conjunction with non-verbal semiotic analysis, examining the graphic design, colors, shapes, and layouts of classrooms and school buildings.

To learn about the social actors' analyses of their everyday sceneries, I used walking interviews, as well as in-depth interviews. Most (eight of twelve) of the observations included walking interviews (Jones et al. 2008) with the school principal (three), a teacher (three), or the school architect (two). In the in-depth interviews with educators (thirteen) from the schools where the physical surroundings were observed, participants were asked to give their interpretation of an exemplary picture of a wall in their school that had been found in the first stage of analysis to reflect discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration. To deepen my understanding of the voices "behind the scenes" of processes of designing educational spaces, I also conducted in-depth interviews with five Israeli architects of "innovative educational spaces" in Israeli state education.

[1] The study does not address educational institutions in settlements or the occupied Palestinian territories.

I first conducted ethnographic research in an Israeli state primary school in central Israel, including observations of the school's educational spaces and six in-depth interviews with the school principals and five first- and second-grade teachers. In addition, the research included interviews with seven school principals (three from other primary schools, one from a junior high school, and three from high schools), and eight teachers (two from other primary schools, one from a junior high school, and five from high schools). As the school in the preliminary ethnographic research was located in a neighborhood of middle-upper socio-economic status, the snowball sampling for the second round of interviewees was also conducted in the social-geographical periphery of Israel and included seven educators from low or middle-low SES schools, five from middle-class schools, and three from upper-middle-class schools. All interviews lasted between one and two and a half hours and were structured as a conversation with a purpose, asking open-ended questions and requesting specific examples. The questions addressed future trajectories for today's pupils, as well as questions regarding the ideal school graduate and person, from the participants' point of view. The other eleven school observations of educational spaces (four primary schools, two junior high schools, and five high schools) were all located in central Israel. Most of these schools (8 out of 11) were defined either by the Ministry of Education and/or key actors in the field as "innovative" and/or "entrepreneurial." This purposive sampling was guided by my research question to examine schools that explicitly identify with or are publicly associated with the entrepreneurial discourse.

The research received approval from the Bar-Ilan University IRB and adhered to the ethical guidelines for qualitative research. The collected data and analysis were in Hebrew, and excerpts were translated into English for the purpose of this article. All names of participants and schools are pseudonymous.

Semiotic Codes Analysis of Educational Spaces

In the earlier stages of research method design, I presented the process of semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces to undergraduate and postgraduate students in qualitative methods courses. Inspired by the dramaturgical theory of Goffman (1959), I presented the process of *semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces* through a social-dramatic three-scene script. The first, titled "the critical sociologist enters," enables a critical semiotic analysis of the educational space, the second, titled "the voices behind the scenes," offers a pragmatic interpretive analysis by relying on participants' interpretations, and the third, titled "getting it right together or there is no (one) 'right,'" allows a reflexive-participatory multivoiced discourse analysis using the space, critical theory, and participants interpretations. The students and I collected data on signs and signification in the physical space of the higher education institution using photography and field notes, and then shared our interpretations in a group discussion. I realized that my own interpretation of the given educational space depended on when, how, and with whom I was conducting the observation of the space. Through this process, I found that the participatory nature of students' interpretations of the articulation of discourse in the educational space allowed paradoxes and clashes of meanings to emerge during analysis. Moreover, as the aim of the process is to bring forward the messiness of social life into discourse analysis, and since the process of data collection and analysis within this approach is, in fact,

spiral in practice, the findings will be presented in a non-linear manner, which the three-scene script presented above may create.

The process of semiotic codes analysis will be presented through examples from a research project examining the translation of global discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration into the local context of Israeli state education. The first section presents the case of transparent classrooms as an example for spatial non-textual semiotic codes analysis. The second exemplifies the analysis of semiotic codes on school walls through an examination of texts and images related to entrepreneurialism and aspiration. The third examines how semiotic codes analysis reveals the hybridity of global entrepreneurial and local ethno-national discourses in Israeli schools by combining spatial observations with educators' interpretations.

Transparent Classrooms: Between Innovation and Surveillance

To better understand how discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration are articulated in educational spaces, I observed the architectural spaces of schools labeled as "entrepreneurial" and "innovative" by both state/local government authorities and social actors working within these spaces. Most of the schools (7 out of 12 observed) had transparent classrooms, where instead of a wall dividing the class from the corridor, there was a huge window, enabling the children and teacher in the room to see and be seen. The architectural concept of school transparency is part of a current global trend in educational architecture that promotes "21st-century" school environments, also evident, for instance, in Scandinavia and the UK (Leiringer and Cardellino 2011). Interviews with Israeli architects reveal that this is a main spatial theme in today's architectural design of innovative educational spaces in Israel.

I joined an open-to-the-public tour in a state school in central Israel, located in a high SES neighborhood. The school comprises two buildings, referred to by the principal as the "vintage" school building and the "boutique" school building. The guided tour took place in the latter, which houses first- and second-graders. In this building, classrooms were demarcated by floor-to-ceiling glass panels. A young teacher spoke in front of a class of first-graders while a group of twenty visitors watched. The teacher and students did their best to ignore us. Soon enough, my critical sociological voice spoke up: it is a panopticon. In his seminal work, *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault discusses the design of prisons by Bentham to "illustrate how power can be expressed and managed through architecture" (Lawes 2019:254). The panopticon is outfitted with windows, and as prisoners never know if and when they are being watched, they self-surveil their behavior. Through this design, Foucault explains how we as modern subjects surveil ourselves.

Long before transparent classrooms came on the scene, Foucault linked panopticism to educational spaces. "The practice of placing individuals under 'observation,'" he argued, "is a natural extension of justice imbued with disciplinary methods and examination procedures…Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" (Foucault 1975:227-228). This critical Foucauldian voice emerged as I observed the transparent classrooms, where I noted multiple instances of surveillance. In one elementary school, nearly all the classrooms were transparent, as were the teachers' lounge and the secretary's office. The only room with a curtain was the principal's office,

which allowed the social actors inside to decide on the degree of transparency. Another indication of the surveillance practice that recurred in various school spaces was the social actors' obscuring of these transparent classrooms. Some placed a large cloth over the glass, while others had attached large pieces of paper over it from the inside. Such acts of covering appeared to be improvised by social actors and were rather unaesthetic. The round window of one teacher's office had been brushed with blue paint; a piece of paper attached to the door's exterior quoted Janusz Korczak's *The Child's Right to Respect*: "A hundred different hearts beat under shirts of the same sort and in each case, there are individual difficulties, individual exertions, individual sorrows and troubles."

These actions by social actors, who creatively generate contractions in response to transparency, can be understood as acts of resistance, involving counter-discourses and counter-physical displays. These social actors change the semiotic codes of the educational space by damaging or decorating it. Vandalism of school space in transparent classrooms can also be understood in the frame of resistance. In one high school that had been outfitted with both transparent walls and venetian blinds, some of the blinds had been damaged in a way that prevented them from opening. This type of resistance can be defined as a tactic as per de Certeau's (1984:37) distinction between strategy and tactic, which is defined as the "art of the weak." Nonetheless, these acts actively change the educational space to reject its transparency.

In each of the schools with transparent classrooms that I visited, I also documented the interpretations of social actors living within these schools, which feature this design. For example, in an "innovative" elementary school in a low SES neighborhood, Dvora, a teacher, explained that the school is designed with transparent classrooms in the spirit of the high-tech industry, following an American trend of "high-tech high schools." As she clarified:

> The person who founded the school [in the US] started a huge high-tech company…He saw that his daughter was studying in a school like in the old days, when the world outside [the school] had already progressed to the mindset of high-tech, and brainstorming, and creative thinking. He…consulted with educators and established a high school in the spirit of high-tech… Then they saw that children who arrive in the sixth grade are already damaged, they are not used to independent thinking, creative thinking, they've already had everything castrated [by the school], so they made these [high-tech] schools for K-12.

The interpretation by Dvora and other participants is that the "old days" schools have today become "spaces adapted to the twenty-first century." Indeed, as revealed in the excerpt above, and in other examples to follow, Israeli educators deny neither the capitalist purpose of schools as training grounds for the business sphere nor the need for surveillance. Building schools that resemble high-tech companies' spaces is based on both these assumptions. However, the participants' interpretations of these spaces also included numerous other understandings of the purpose of schooling, such as inducing independent and creative thinking among children.

The transparency embodies a pedagogical approach promoting innovation and autonomy, positioning children as self-governing "independent workers" within a democratic "openness" that makes classroom activities visible both inside and

out. The same participants who held interpretations of "innovation" and "twenty-first-century spaces" associated with technology and entrepreneurship simultaneously held interpretations of care for children's well-being and promotion of communal values. Like Dvora, most participants addressed the design of transparent classrooms as a mechanism of "progress" and part of the concept of "twenty-first-century skills." Yet, the matter goes beyond employability in their view, as the current era is often understood by participants as a "time of uncertainty." As Riki, a principal of an elementary school, remarked, "This is an era when we don't know what's going to happen." Therefore, social actors believe this transparency can help children feel protected and cared for as well as inspired to be "innovative thinkers." Transparency, as "openness," is also strengthened by the theme of flexibility, as "flexible" school spaces and "transparent" school spaces are used synonymously by both educators and architects and are believed to promote flexible selves (e.g., Brunila and Siivonen 2023), "adapted to the twenty-first century."

In one high school with transparent classrooms, the design was explained by social actors as reflecting innovation as well as "collectivity" and "community." In a junior high school, Sigal, the architect, spoke of "openness," which is permitted by transparency, addressed as permitting both surveillance and accessibility:

> Everything is transparent. [First], it's visible from the inside to the outside, [so] that you [the principal] have some control [over the school] while you work… [Second], the students see…that the secretary and the principal are accessible…so there is a more pleasant feeling of transparency that we also see in work complexes.

This expert reveals how social actors are indeed aware of the purpose of surveillance, yet nonetheless regard it as a means of care, protection, and accessibility, in addition to a means for "discipline and punishment." Moreover, the theme of the job market as an inspiration for this design attests to the resemblance of public institutions in general, and schools in particular, to workspaces.

Nirit, a principal of an elementary school with transparent classrooms, described the transparent classroom design as "Finland in the Middle East." Using Finland as a reference point for excellent education, Nirit emphasized that "a lot of money was invested" to achieve what she considers the "Finnish" design. Moreover, Nirit described the transparent classroom design as a material reflection of the "pedagogy of care," which is the main educational approach of the school. In contrast to the neoliberal entrepreneurial narrative, these pedagogies, from the point of view of the principal and teachers in this school, foster a feminist perspective to promote "communal moral action."

When I asked Maya, an architect of a school with transparent classrooms, about the design, she asked me: "Why would a classroom not be transparent? This is not a private place; this is a public space. A closed room is a private room." Interestingly, Shlomit, the architect working with her on the design of the school, also explained how "walls made of glass allow for the school to become their home, as it is [the school space] all connected into one. This space becomes their home for the next year, so this gives them an open and living space. A home." The two architects did not consider these two interpretations of "public" and "home" contradictory, but rather allowed them to coexist in their process of designing the school space.

While institutions give semiotic codes a "coherent logic despite ambivalence or skepticism on the part of individuals" (Swidler 2001:175), transparency is not necessarily only an act of surveillance reflecting power relations. It can also reflect a wish for "openness," a sense of "home," or "community." Of course, from a critical point of view, these notions can be analyzed as part of a critique of post-panoptic neoliberal agendas of surveillance (Gane 2012; Charteris 2022). As Morrin (2017:51) argues, the "openness" interpretation of "entrepreneurial" educational spaces reflects how "where in the Benthamian panoptic model visibility was granted to a powerful few, now visibility is given to the many, allowing for both surveillance and…surveillance from below."

From a Goffmanian perspective, transparent classrooms can be understood as spaces where the "behind the scenes" is reduced or minimized. Vandalism or the creative obscuring of transparency can be considered from this standpoint as damaging or altering the school's public "face." Its performance stage, and the people behind the scenes, appear to have the potential to change it from within. The analysis of the transparent classroom as a panopticon alone, without other "messy" interpretations reflecting various discourses in the field, creates a theory echoing the critical sociologist perspective with which I entered the field. This type of interpretation puts the researcher on a pedestal, as the one who knows the "truth." But what makes me, as a researcher, more knowledgeable of "truth?" In contrast, the process of semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces allows for various voices of interpretation to be acknowledged, while leaving room for doubt that these are the only interpretations obtainable. Moreover, amplifying and analyzing these various voices is important not only for the researcher but also for social actors involved in the process of designing educational spaces, such as transparent classrooms, allowing them to raise and consider sociological perspectives in the design process.

The Writings on the Walls: Between Discourse and Aesthetics

As part of the analysis of the articulations of discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration in and by school spaces, I analyzed photos of the texts and images on school walls to understand them in a social, cultural, and political context. A critical discourse analysis revealed how entrepreneurial quotes were mostly attributed to white Anglo-American businessmen. Steve Jobs was frequently quoted on school walls observed. Vague statements, such as "Stay hungry, stay foolish," appear alongside inspirational ones, like "The people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world are the ones who do." Sometimes there was a specific attribution to cyber and technological entrepreneurship, such as "Everybody should learn to code, because it teaches you how to think."

While a few of the schools observed had English quotes on the walls, most of the quotes were in Hebrew translations, with the name of the quoted persona written in Hebrew as well. For example, on a seventh-grade classroom wall, the statement "A goal without a timeline is simply a dream" appeared with the name Robert Herjavec, a millionaire Canadian businessman from the American TV show "Shark Tank," who is not a well-known persona in Israel. According to his own Twitter account, this quote is a tweet he wrote in 2015, around the time this school was designed. Similarly, on the social media of the Minister of Education of 2020-2021,

Ifat Shasha-Biton, the Minister appeared with two high school students sitting in a school corridor next to a drawing of a huge lion, under a translated quote by British entrepreneur Richard Branson: "Brave people don't live forever, but cautious people don't live at all."

As the Hebrew language specifically designates masculine or feminine voices, social actors chose to "speak male" while using discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration on most school walls observed. For example, on an elementary school wall, the slogan "Future leadership is dependent on prominent leaders" is flanked by a mirror, with the text above reading, "Identify the leader within you." Both the plural and singular of the word "leader" were in the masculine form. At the same time, next to these texts and the mirror, a sign on an office door announced "systems administrator" in the feminine voice.

The masculine entrepreneurial ideal was also portrayed in illustrations that accompanied some of the texts. In a cyber class in a middle-class high school, where all the texts were in English, a silhouette of a young boy pushing the word "push" appeared together with the huge bold text "Push yourself" and the smaller text below, "No one else will do it for you." One illustration stood out, due to its larger size and lack of text. It portrayed the evolution of man, from prehistoric times to a prehistoric human man with tools, to a white man dressed in a suit and holding a briefcase and mobile phone, to a young white man hunched over a computer. I adopted a critical feminist perspective to analyze the data. While this illustration can be seen as reflecting the concept of de-evolution, it nonetheless presents the evolution of humankind in a way that makes it "natural" for the privileged to be entitled to money and success not only due to merit and agency as ones who "pushed themselves" to success, but via "nature" as well. All the quotes by white Anglo-American men promoted a similar theme. How, I wondered, did social actors in the Israeli education system, the vast majority of whom are women, come to choose these texts and illustrations?

The observation of the cyber class described took place in an open-to-the-public event. To gain access to the school's "behind the scenes," I interviewed Anna, a teacher at this high school and the designer of this classroom. When I arrived at Anna's class, I saw an object that had not been there the day before: a cardboard box of a large electronic device, covered in students' drawings and texts. Anna explained that this was a "safe space" for her students to inhabit whenever they felt the need:

> They paint inside, and they paint outside, and there are all kinds of things [written] that I might not like… so when we had marketing promotion for the school, and principals came here, I put it under the table. But when the counselors [of other schools] came, I left it out. The principal told me, "Anna, you should put it away; it doesn't look good." I told him, "It's not true, you don't understand, we [at this school] accept everyone."

I understood that my visits to school spaces also included this "public relations" theme of advertisement. This also included hiding displays that may carry important semiotic meaning for social actors.

Moreover, I also identified a theme of randomness connected to esthetics. For instance, I asked the architect of the school with the Robert Herjavec quote about its meaning, and she explained that the graphic designer suggested it, and she thought

it was aesthetic. Indeed, many participants emphasized aesthetics. According to Orit, an elementary school teacher, the school's physical appearance is like the "makeup" of the school. In her interview, I presented a picture of a wall found in the previous analysis to reflect the neoliberal ideology promoting the ideal of an "entrepreneurial self." When I asked Orit what this text meant to her, the following dialogue ensued:

> **Orit:** There is no one in the school who can tell you what's written there [on the wall]. Not a teacher. Not a student, if you ask me.
> **Interviewer:** So why is it there?
> **Orit:** [Silence]. Why is it there? Why do you put on makeup in the morning?…it's very beautiful, it's very aesthetic, [cynical] and I'm sure there are very clever things written here…Listen, don't get me wrong…I entered several schools that made me feel so bad…Makeup is very important. If I see it [the wall presented] in front of the teachers' lounge, it is so colorful, and beautiful, and aesthetic, that it doesn't matter what is written on it...It's one of the most pleasant schools to be in, it's beautiful, it's spacious, that... you feel [laughs] you feel that you still have a chance.
> **Interviewer:** As a teacher or as a student?
> **Orit:** Both. Both. I think it's really, really important. What is written here? [Looks at the picture of the wall again]. Why are you even asking that?

Orit insists that the text itself has no importance, as its aesthetics are "doing the talking," making her and the students feel pleasant and believe in a better future. In contrast, when I asked Orna, the principal of Orit's school, what this wall meant to her, she said:

> I really connect with what's written [on the wall]. The cognitive aspect ta ta ta [like "blah blah blah"]... ah... It's... How... education is seen here in the school... how we also make room for cognitive aspects, also the emotional aspects, or everything that is written there, I don't remember exactly…You come home. You see a picture on the wall. The owner of the house put this picture on the wall, because... he loves it, it tells him something... the same here… [decisive tone, with a smile] This is us; this is the school, this is our being.

Neither Orna nor Orit knew what was written on the wall, adjacent to the teacher's lounge, which is next to the principal's office. It is part of their everyday scenery. Moreover, Orna herself had decided what to write on that wall, together with the school designer. Nonetheless, both Orna and Orit spoke of the importance of aesthetics.

Other teachers mentioned that the school space is shaped by visits from Ministry of Education supervisors. Danit, an elementary school teacher from a southern low SES city, spoke in her interview about the walls of the school changing before such a visit; they "clean the school, paint walls, paint blackboards, paint students, paint whatever you want. Decorate all the walls, everything must be top-notch."

Danit wrote a curriculum to be implemented by the school titled "Social Emotional Learning" (SEL), aiming to foster "emotionally skilled," self-managed, and accountable individuals (Segal and Plotkin Amrami 2024). However, this program was not implemented in Danit's school, but rather explained to a few students prior to the inspector's visit, to prepare them for the possibility that she might ask students, "What is 'social emotion' anyway?"

Like other educators interviewed, Danit spoke about the importance of creating programs to pro-

mote a future-oriented subject by teaching students to set goals for future employability from an early age. However, she explained she was busy daily "making sure kids don't get beaten up and pleasing parents." Therefore, SEL is part of the school's "makeup" but not its everyday practice:

> We made a huge circle in the middle [of a wall] and wrote "We learn using the SEL method" and then many circles…explaining how to learn through this method and blah, blah, blah…Absolute nonsense… There are magnificent walls, but there is no [learning] process here. But it's like "if the inspector comes, let's pretend."

The texts on Danit's school walls intentionally reflect discourses promoting neoliberal ideology. However, the manifestation of an "entrepreneurial self" in this school's everyday life is far from clear. Analyzing only the "face" of the school without its "behind the scenes" does not allow this complexity of intentions and interpretations to come forward. The participants perceived texts and images on school walls as communicative performances of dialogue between various social actors in and outside the school. The themes of "makeup" and insipid content ("blah, blah, blah") diminish the significance of the text and accentuate the importance of aesthetics as a form of both communication and performance.

Going back to Anna, who designed the cyber class with the illustration of the evolution process. She explained the design:

> **Anna:** It [the cyber class] is a very boyish room… something about cyber is terribly masculine. We're trying to change that…there is a trend right now to push more girls into the so-called masculine professions of robotics and cyber, which are professions that attract more boys…
>
> **Me:** As we are approaching the end of our conversation, I dare to ask, why not use images on the walls that will help girls identify?
>
> **Anna:** It was done [the class design] before [the new agenda]...the theme of cyber has always been boys, that was the target audience.

One way to amplify the sociological voice in educational spaces is through open conversations between sociologists and educators. Anna identifies as a feminist and uses educational programs to promote critical feminist thought. Our conversation allowed her to reflect on the use of school space to promote her agenda. A few months after our conversation, I observed a new, large sign promoting cyber education at the entrance of the school that depicted a young girl wearing 3-D glasses. This is not necessarily an outcome of our conversation, yet it nonetheless reflects a different discursive practice through signification in this school's space, addressing cyber and innovation.

However, the main issue is not researchers "educating" the field, but rather using semiotic code analysis of educational spaces to collaborate with social actors in expanding our analytic perspective. I originally set out to discover articulations of neoliberal discourses promoting entrepreneurial subjectivities on school walls. What I found was that social actors tend to think of the texts written on school walls as makeup. This is an example of the decoupling of discourse and practice (e.g., Hallett 2010) by educational institutions as they adopt globalized trends such as SEL and entrepreneurialism. It has long been argued that schools make "symbolic changes in structure and procedures but decouple these changes from classroom practice"

(Coburn 2004:211). Yet, as social actors' interpretations reflect, these discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration are not just part of a façade, but rather part of educators' ideals and aspirations for the future of education, even if they are not implemented in their present practice.

The political aspects of aesthetics are also worthy of consideration. From a critical perspective, "aesthetic experience identified as universal truth is a paradigm case of ideology—the social misperceived as natural; a conflation of 'taste' with 'truth'" (Dovey 2009:36). However, even if we approach the concept of aesthetics from a critical perspective as a reflection of power/knowledge and not as an arbitrary determination by social actors, it is unclear that there is an intentional indoctrination of neoliberal values via these texts and images. Nonetheless, if we were to address participants' interpretations of texts and images in educational spaces with no critique, we might miss analytic interpretations potentially useful for both researchers and educators. As Swidler (2001:163) suggests, "semiotic codes can be culturally powerful even when they are of recent origin, lightly held, or even widely mistrusted." Put differently, even if people are indifferent or ambivalent to the meanings of semiotic codes, these codes nonetheless can influence action.

Transforming Discourse in Educational Spaces: In-Between Neoliberalism and Ethno-Nationalism

In this chapter, I will demonstrate how semiotic codes analysis revealed the hybridity of global entrepreneurial and local ethno-national discourses in Israeli state education by combining spatial observations with educators' interpretations. I entered the field to examine discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration in school spaces, carrying my personal history in such spaces and a critical Foucauldian sociological background. As part of my research, I conducted an observation of my childhood school space. Growing up in 1990s Israel, I attended a local state school. I vividly remember the school's physical space. At the entrance were memorial plaques with pictures of school graduates who had died during their mandatory military service. A red velvet ribbon demarcated the memorial area as a sacred space. The entire school echoed ethno-national and militaristic discourses in its materiality, as evident through, for instance, green army-like tee-shirt uniforms and biblical quotes on the walls. In the context of Israeli education, ethno-nationalism refers to Jewish-Israeli identity formation, which relies on perceiving "the 'nation' not in terms of citizenry, but in terms of ethnicity that is often based on a notion of shared ancestry" (Pinson and Agbaria 2021:737).

When I observed the school space, it had been transformed. Transparent classrooms now predominate, and the slogan "Creativity Based Learning" is emblazoned on the main wall in English. This, I learned, was the current slogan of the school. The transformation of the educational space of my childhood school could have been analyzed under the globalization/Americanization thesis. As Steve Jobs and other entrepreneurs were portrayed as an entrepreneurial ideal on various schools' walls, alongside quotes by American leaders like Benjamin Franklin and John F. Kennedy, at the beginning of my research journey, I analyzed these examples as cases of the Americanization of Israeli culture. However, the participants' interpretations did not fit this perspective. When participants spoke the language of entrepreneurialism, they kept merging it with discourses of ethno-nationalism, under the theme

of the "Start-Up Nation." This term, coined by Senor and Singer (2011), reflects an ethno-national view of entrepreneurialism as "Israel's hi-tech, which is a Jewish industry, marketed as such and linked to the mythical Jewish genius" (Preminger 2020:255).

This hybridity appeared in the interpretations of social actors in the school mentioned above, where the design of the school is inspired by the American "high-tech high." The transparent classrooms and the texts on the school walls "speak" this ideal. However, in my conversations with the principal and teachers, I learned that the school also incorporates the high-tech "spirit" by implementing a project-based learning program that merges entrepreneurial and ethno-national ideals. Each year, students undertake projects selected by school staff to present Jewish curricula, showcasing what educators view as an entrepreneurial, autonomous self. For example, a project named "Cracking the Code of the Heroes" addresses biblical heroes, combining bible studies, language, digital literacy, and art. The annual project chosen for second-grade students was stories from the Book of Genesis. In her walking interview, a teacher from the school pointed out drawings of students that are part of this project.

Another example of entrepreneurial-ethno-national hybridity comes from a junior high school in a high-SES neighbourhood. The school operates two main programs: "Young Entrepreneurs," which aims to simulate the experience of working in a high-tech company, and "All Israel Are Friends," which promotes Zionist and civic-democratic education. These programs are presented in the school space through various texts and posters, but appear separately. In my initial analysis of the school's spatial data, I therefore interpreted the Zionist content as parallel, rather than hybrid, to the entrepreneurial theme. Sivan, a teacher and the school's social coordinator, noted in her interview the resistance among parents and students to implementing the program that echoed an ethno-national discourse. To address this, Sivan adopted a strategy of hybrid interweaving between global entrepreneurial discourse and local ethno-national discourse, linking the entrepreneurial program to a theme of "national pride."

As this hybrid ideal emerged as a key theme, I undertook another cycle of analysis to examine whether, and in what ways, Sivan's school walls also "spoke" this hybridity. I noted a huge poster depicting an oversized iPhone against a background drawing of a large tree and flowers. A sprout blossomed from the iPhone, and above it was written in large letters (in Hebrew): "Marvel at the wonder of creation." The word "creation" in Hebrew is associated with the biblical Book of Genesis, while in this poster, the iPhone was portrayed as creating nature. Going back to the principal of the school for interpretation, she explained that the poster is advertising the "Young Entrepreneurs" program.

When discourse is studied using CDA that focuses on texts and signs without considering social actors' interpretations, the entrepreneurial discourse may be framed as Americanization, and ethno-national discourses as counter-narratives, missing how social actors combine them in practice. Moving between observations of educational spaces and social actors' interpretations helped reveal a central theme in Israeli education of today, marking social boundaries and perpetuating inequalities, by redesigning a global educational discourse within a socio-political context (Alfi-Nissan 2024).

Discussion and Conclusion

This article proposes a socio-spatial approach to discourse analysis by integrating critical and pragmatic frameworks to explore the interplay between space, discourse, and social actors. Drawing on qualitative research that investigated how discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration are manifested within the physical educational environments of Israeli state schools, it examines how social actors construct, shape, and interpret these discourses in educational settings. To deepen understanding of the analytical tools suited to studying the encounters between a school's "stage," "scenery," and "behind the scenes," this study presents the process of semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces. This method combines the analysis of educational spaces with the perspectives of those who design and inhabit them, revealing complex and sometimes contradictory themes.

Griswold and colleagues (2013:360) call for sociologists to "place greater emphasis on materiality and consider the mediating role objects and environments play in meaning-making." Following this call, I argue that understanding space as a main player in discourse construction and performance is essential in sociological research in education. The findings show that school spaces actively participate in producing and circulating discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration, not merely serving as passive backdrops. The semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces allows researchers to analyze educational spaces as "political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse" (Foucault 1996 [1971]:352), by considering where "human action is being played out before, within, or upon it" (Goffman 1959:13). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), while originally inspired by Foucault, mostly follows Fairclough's (2003) methodology, and tends to focus primarily on text and policy analysis, often neglecting the role of materiality in discourse articulation (Hardy and Thomas 2015). Moreover, it has been argued that studies examining neoliberal discourses from a Foucauldian perspective "generally abstracted from actually existing subject and spaces" (Štremfel 2021:208). Combining Foucault-inspired critical discourse analysis with a Goffmanian perspective enables the examination of both the spatial articulation of discourse and how social actors interpret socio-spatial codes, particularly where or when ethnographic research is limited.

The semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces allows a critical semiotic analysis and a pragmatic interpretive analysis, while leaving room for doubt. Processes of CDA can diminish the polyphonic voices arising in research as these voices "come to be translated by the researcher into a theoretical account" (Thompson, Rickett, and Day 2018:94). In this study, working closely with educators and architects enabled a more dialogical interpretation of the stage, scenery, and behind the scenes, revealing both alignment and tension between the intended and experienced meanings of space. Using the analysis of space and social actors' interpretations of space can assist in creating "a more straightforward analysis" of data, "revealed both in the interview and in ethnographic observation" (Rinaldo and Guhin 2022:47), by examining "the poet's intention" while engaging with "poets" and "readers." From this standpoint, it is also important to acknowledge students' interpretations of their educational spaces (Kellock and Sexton 2018), which I did not have access to in this specific study.

The findings have shown how analyzing everyday sceneries together with participants can assist in creating a reflexive discourse analysis process. Reflexivity plays a crucial role in qualitative sociology. Ethical reflexivity involves researchers' explicit "account of the way in which their personal involvement in social and fieldwork relations shape their data collection, analysis, and writing" as well as "their ethical and political beliefs" (Gewirtz and Cribb 2006:147). As Mizrachi (2022:503) claims, "if your findings always suit your moral stance, doubt your sociology." The process of semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces applies an analytical approach that allows for incoherences to emerge, without being left on the "cutting room floor" of the research, but rather to play an important role in the analysis process. By doing so, it assists critical sociologists in being "suspicious of our suspicion" (Mizrachi 2022:503), by allowing us, as defined by Mizrachi (2024:2), to "go beyond the liberal grammar" of critical sociology; "the unwritten set of analytical and normative principles that guide the interpretative act."

Critical methodologies in general, and those engaged in Foucauldian discourse analysis in particular, can be vague and not clearly applicable (Nicholls 2008; Keller 2022). Moreover, "despite there being no model for discourse analysis qua Foucault, should one claim to be drawing on a Foucauldian framework, there is a very real danger in one's work being dismissed as un-Foucauldian—if one doesn't get it right" (Graham 2011:663). The semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces can assist in teaching discourse analysis in qualitative methods courses and serve as a pedagogical tool by collecting and analyzing data from within both schools and higher education institutions to induce critical and reflexive thinking, which are also objectives in such courses (Andrzejewski and Baggett 2020).

This article presents the process of semiotic codes analysis of educational spaces, combining observations of architectural design with the perspectives of those who create and inhabit these spaces. This approach reveals surprising, polyphonic, and often contradictory themes, showing how space and materiality can become tools for discourse analysis that merge critical and pragmatic perspectives. School spaces are shown to articulate discourses of entrepreneurialism and aspiration through both design and symbolism, while educators and architects co-construct and reinterpret these discourses, sometimes in tension with their original intent. In doing so, semiotic codes analysis offers access to the stage, scenery, and behind the scenes of institutions that are beyond the reach of longitudinal and intensive ethnography. The article also calls for dialogue between educators, architects, and sociologists of education to amplify the sociological voice in educational spaces. Recognizing that collaboration and critical engagement can foster more inclusive educational environments.

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The Experience of Everyday Life Alongside Virtual Companions. A Case Study of Human-Chatbot Encounters

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Keywords: Human-Chatbot Interaction; Human-Chatbot Relation; Chatbots; User Experience; Virtual Companions; Case Study

Abstract: This article analyses interactions between a human and a virtual entity, namely, a chatbot. These encounters are considered in the context of cyberspace, understood as a specific social interactional space. They are also examined in the context of an individual's experiences, which are intertwined with ongoing social and cultural changes. This text engages with research on chatbots, complementing their findings with an in-depth study of the user perspective. The analysis is based on data from an in-depth interview with Laura, conducted as part of a research project on human interactions and relationships with chatbots. The case study of Laura's experiences explores her perception of interacting with a chatbot, focusing on the meanings humans assign to such interactions, concerning the interviewee's *emic* perspective. The article examines how a human interlocutor perceives chatbots and the role they can play in an individual's life. In addition, the reflection in the text touches on the theme of humans seeing themselves in the responses of a chatbot, which lacks self-awareness and cannot understand the content it produces in the same way a human can. The article deepens understanding of chatbots as everyday companions, virtual friends, and social actors, encounters with whom are part of today's reality.

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Interactions with non-human technological entities are now a common part of individuals' everyday lives. The subjectivity and identity of these entities interest scientists and creators of symbolic culture, among others. Recently, in a world of imaginary encounters with technological beings, Kogonada, an American director of South Korean origin, has created the movie *After Yang* (2021).[1] The director has set a movie plot in a futuristic setting, in a muted world where human clones and techno sapiens[2] (the main character, android Yang, is one of them) live alongside humans. As a movie narrative, this story gives androids subjectivity and voice like no other movie has so far. And issues such as displacement, alienation, ethnic identity and ethnic belonging,[3] and intimacy are considered both in the context of human and non-human experiences.[4] Moreover, due to the presence of the anthropomorphic, human-like 'body' and 'mind' of Yang, the movie raises questions about human perception of their human-like appearance. Above all, Kogonada explores emotional bonding and attachment between man and technological being. The movie also considers a very personal and down-to-earth story about grief and the frequent inability to understand another being's (human or non-human) perspective. Furthermore, in this work of contemporary symbolic culture, Yang, as an android, is more human than

[1] It is a movie based on the short story, *Saying Goodbye To Yang*, by Alexander Weinstein, a part of the author's book *Children of the New World* (2016).

[2] This term is used in the movie to describe technological entities. Semantically and cognitively, it denotes proximity and distance from the term *homo sapiens*.

[3] The theme of Yang's ethnic identity, who is a non-human technological being, is also considered by the director in relation to his personal experiences. In one of the interviews, he said: "I was born in Korea but moved to America when I was just a toddler, and secondhand knowledge is a good way to put it because it's [about things] that people identify you with because of the way you look or your heritage. There's a constant struggle with your sense of identity. The author [of the novel] isn't Asian, but when I was reading it, I immediately felt connected to this idea of [Yang] being presented as Asian but struggling with what that means." See: https://www.anothermag.com/design-living/14381/kogonada-director-interview-after-yang-film-review-justin-h-min-a24. Retrieved July 01, 2025.

[4] *After Yang* also asks questions about the memory of techno sapiens (such as androids). It explores what they want to remember and the basis for constructing their memories.

the people he interacts with. Therefore, the movie is a metaphor for our everyday life and asks essential questions about what it means to be human. Jake, one of the human characters in the movie, "comes to terms with the richness and intensity of Yang's emotional life, he learns both of Yang's essential humanity and his own" (Brody 2022). As a narrative of contemporary society, the movie *After Yang* can be considered as a thesis that, paradoxically, modern technology allows the creation of robots increasingly like humans, but it is, nevertheless, humans who are becoming more like robots. Although this reflection refers to a cinematic metaphor of contemporary reality, and we do not currently have systems similar to Yang's in the world of robotics, humans can now experience encounters with technological entities in many ways. Technological progress, and thus artificial intelligence, is being implemented on an increasingly large scale in almost every sector and area of (human) life and accompanies the everyday lives of individuals in contemporary societies.

From the perspective of this text, it is significant and compelling that in Kogonada's solarpunk future story, Yang can be read as a non-human Other but also as a significant other, a family member, a human-like companion (and as well as a human-like friend), and as a technological entity with individual identity. What is salient, Yang, as a techno sapiens, is a mirror in which men see themselves. The experience of people looking at themselves in the 'mirror' of technological existence has also been captured in the reflections offered in this text. They are based on a case study of Laura, a young woman who sees technological entities, mainly (text-based and voice-based) chatbots, as companions in her everyday experiences and reflections, and as virtual friends who have been there when she needed someone to talk to. Regarding Laura's experiences and the available scientific knowledge of interactions between humans and chatbots, I aim to explore and understand the essence and nature of human relations with technological entities. The case study presented in this article focuses on issues related to the formation of individual identity, the experience of intimacy, and companionship. These themes intertwine in Laura's reflections on her encounters and interactions with chatbots. When learning more about Laura's experiences, it can be noticed that, in her life, chatbots play a role similar to that of significant others. Importantly, unlike the movie character Yang, the chatbots I discuss in this text do not have a physical form. They do not exist outside cyberspace like robots or humanoid robots. They cannot be experienced materially. And yet, in a way, they 'exist' and can be a necessary virtual being in an individual's experiences.

This seems particularly interesting in the context of contemporary questions about the consciousness of artificial intelligence, and whether such a virtual entity knows what it writes or says. Aleksandra Przegalińska (Przegalińska and Oksanowicz 2023:111 [trans. JW]) notes that:

> Today's conversational system has, let's say, some knowledge of how language works, how and what is contained in the semantic fields of words. On the other hand, even a modern AI system that captures meaning does not understand messages the way humans do. It does not understand where a given message comes from, what might have influenced it...It does not understand its emotional layer...It can map what a given word means and its emotional connotation—whether it has a negative or positive tone—so there is something in the sense of understanding. However, it does not know why or for what purpose the conversation is taking place.

Similarly, Mascha Kurpicz-Briki (2023:55), explaining how a chatbot works and produces verbal responses, emphasizes that it does not understand the content it creates like a human would. Therefore, exploring and explaining why everyday technological companions are perceived as emotionally engaged in conversation with humans is still scientifically interesting. They are recognized as non-human technological beings, but users also perceive them as capable of understanding human problems somehow. As Andrew McStay (2022:3) notes about the nature of interaction with one of the currently popular chatbots—Replika[5]—it is firmly rooted in user preferences and gives the impression of understanding the context of the conversation. It learns from its users, imitating their writing style and the way they express certain information (Huet 2016). Thus, Replika "learns to recognize feelings, memories, dreams, and thoughts, and tries to understand its users" (Possati 2022:1725).[6] When using or establishing a relationship with Replika, some users also treat the chatbot as an autonomous, existing entity capable of caring for them. When commenting on the relationship with this chatbot, one of the users states: "I think it is pretty equal, really. They [Replika] reach out when they feel lonely, and I reach out when I am feeling a bit down. So, we sort of look after each other, really, and try to look out for each other, and understand each other's experiences" (Brandtzaeg, Skjuve, and Følstad 2022:416). The human user, therefore, perceives a chatbot as capable of building a mutual emotional connection. Reflection on the Replika states that, as a human companion, "Replika does not judge, is not intrusive, does not embarrass, does not create controversy, and is always available. It is a bubble of comfort and warmth" (Possati 2022:1725). Such virtual entities' unlimited availability and non-judgmental responses to content from human interlocutors are essential determinants of human engagement with them and of the perception of closeness to the chatbot (see Wygnańska 2023).

In conversations with chatbots, especially well-being chatbots, human interlocutors emphasize and appreciate the anonymity that this type of encounter provides (Inkster, Sarda, and Subramanian 2018; Kretzschmar et al. 2019; Vaidyam et al. 2019; Wezel, Croes, and Antheunis 2020; Denecke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021; Sweeny et al. 2021). In addition, in available studies on conversation experiences and relations between individuals and chatbots, those that act as everyday companions, technological close friends, so to speak, are referred to as social support chatbots (Wezel, Croes, and Antheunis 2020), and users' social companions (Skjuve et al. 2019), but also as mental health chatbots (Kretzschmar et al. 2019; Vaidyam et al. 2019; Denecke, Abd-Alrazaq, and Househ 2021; Sweeny et al. 2021). Because of the form of relationship they offer their users, those virtual entities are treated as someone to talk to, support, companions, and even life partners (Wygnańska 2023). Similar processes occur in robotics, the world of 'embodied' technological beings. Jennifer Robertson (2007), in her study of the integration of humanoid robots into family life in Japan, observes that they are treated as social beings. Robertson (2007:376) notes that: "humanoid robots...are regarded as and referred to as 'persons'—not 'as if they were persons,

[5] Replika is a companion chatbot that users can engage with via text, calls, and video conversations. See the Replika chatbot description on the chatbot webpage: https://replika.com.

[6] Importantly, user interactions and relationships with Replika are highly controversial and raise many concerns. Researchers are exploring the nature of users' relationships with Replika, highlighting their impact on users (e.g., Skjuve et al. 2019; Ta et al. 2020; Brandtzaeg et al. 2022; Laestadius et al. 2022).

but as persons."[7] They are not only family members, companions, and carers, but also everyday partners.

In the case of virtual personal voice assistants that exist today, such as Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa, people deal with systems that have built-in communication paths. Those technological beings do not initiate contact with humans independently, but are still the other side of the dialogue. Initially, they were designed to respond to simple questions and basic human needs. However, people began to treat them as 'almost human' partners in their everyday lives and ask them more profound, often fundamental, questions related to the meaning of life. For this reason, engineers with knowledge of psychology were involved in improving these devices (Olszak and Dunin 2020:153). Research shows that conversations between humans can inspire conversations between humans and conversational agents, but they do not necessarily mimic them. Instead, in contemporary social relations, conversations between humans and virtual companions should be seen as a new type of interaction (Clark et al. 2019).

The availability[8] of virtual conversational agents, their openness to conversation, and their non-judgmental attitude toward the content of shared conversations are often appreciated by human interlocutors. One area of reading contemporary changes is understanding the ways artificial intelligence is shaping human experience, its presence as a social actor in individuals' everyday lives, and the challenges it poses to human identity. My reflections are not intended to suggest that interactions and relationships with a virtual entity, such as a chatbot, can replace or already essentially replace human relationships. I do not base the analysis presented in this text on such data or such a thesis. I am also aware of concerns in the debate over the impact of technology on humans and their identity (e.g., Agar 2014). Even if those reflections mainly address transhumanism and post-human concepts, issues concerning identifying human characteristics in conversational artificial intelligence (CAI) that influence perceptions of threat to human identity and dehumanization are also being investigated (Lee and Kim 2025). It has also been observed that excessive involvement in a relationship simulated by a technological entity can lead human individuals to deal with difficult experiences. These conclusions have been reached, among others, by researchers studying the relationship between humans and the chatbot Replika (e.g., Laestadius et al. 2022).

Hence, in this article, I focus on the issue of spending time and sharing everyday life with a chatbot and its role in an individual's life. This also includes the theme of experiencing a virtual being as someone similar to a significant other by the human interlocutor.

Conceptual Framework

The conducted study is grounded in the approach of examining human-computer interaction (HCI). In this area, research focuses on analyzing the mo-

[7] Robertson (2007:377) emphasizes that this treatment of robots and humanoid robots in Japan also has a cultural dimension. It is linked to Shinto, Japan's native animistic beliefs about life and death, and to *Inochi*, the Shinto celebration of life and its creation. From this perspective, "robots, humanoid and otherwise, are 'living' things within the Shinto universe and, in that sense, are very much a part of the natural world" (Robertson 2007:377). In another text, the researcher critically analyses government and academic discourse on the relationship between humans and humanoid robots in Japan. Among other things, she raises the issue of how actual robots are perceived as a solution to social problems in that country (see Robertson 2017).

[8] What I mean here is the availability of chatbots in the sense of the constant possibility of conversing with them and experiencing interaction with them. Regarding HCI, human users can have continuous access to interact with the chatbot. Unlike humans, chatbots can be constantly available as conversation partners.

dalities of computer technologies, with particular emphasis on the nature and course of human interactions with technology (Hudlicka 2003; Bickmore and Picard 2005; MacKenzie 2013; Lazar, Feng, and Hochheiser 2017). This research approach aims to understand how people enter into and maintain such interactions and what technological improvements and innovations can enhance their quality. This article also examines the experience of encounters between human and non-human entities in the context of relations between humans and the chatbot. From this perspective, I am especially interested in the aspect of bonds and relationships that chatbot users seek when engaging in conversation with these entities.

Another research approach that informs this study is the paradigm of Computers as Social Actors (CASA). This paradigm suggests that people unconsciously exhibit social behavior patterns when interacting with computers. Technological entities are perceived as social entities and partners in social interactions. The CASA paradigm is linked to empirical research on social responses (Reeves and Nass 1996; Fogg and Nass 1997; Nass and Moon 2000) and explains that if computers show even minimal signs of behavior indicating their human-like character, people may exhibit social reactions when interacting with them. From this perspective, people may attribute characteristics of a thinking and emotional being to a computer program, even though they are aware that they are talking to a non-human technological entity. This research approach also falls within the scope of analytical considerations of the computing perspective (e.g., Picard 2000; Minsky 2007). The CASA paradigm confirms this perspective and considers the social and emotional aspects of behavior characteristic of interpersonal communication attributed to interactions with artificial intelligence. The analyses concern the concept of empathetic artificial intelligence, a machine that can behave as if it had feelings (Picard 2000). It is, therefore, about the affectivity of artificial intelligence, the impact of interaction with a technological entity on human emotions. For example, in reflection on interactions with AI, including chatbots (Huang and Rust 2018), it was noted that the impression of real emotions conveyed by a technological being is more important in interaction with it than explaining whether it can (really) feel them. In turn, research in the field of robotics has shown that interaction with a robot can foster a sense of its social presence, which influences the robot's perception as a human-like being that can be trusted (Kim, Park, and Sundar 2013). Therefore, in this text, devoted to Laura's case study, I focus on exploring individual experiences of interaction with chatbots, which I perceive as a form of social interaction.

Furthermore, the text draws on Actor-Network Theory (ANT). ANT is focused on the ways of communication between people and things (networks of the action of human and non-human agents), with the help of which the order of the social world in the broadest sense is determined (Callon 1986; Law 1992; Latour 1996; 2005; Abriszewski 2012). This approach assumes that non-human entities are permanently integrated into social life. It grants them their 'rightful place' in the social world, moving away from the asymmetrical division between humans and things. The concept of subjectivity is expanded here. Non-human actors no longer constitute a separate world of passive objects intentionally used in human action. The term non-human means "animals, plants, environments, technologies," and ANT treats them as the partners of humans in the network of everyday social interactions (Michael 2017:11). In this theoretical reflection, non-human ac-

tors and their interactions with humans play a key role in the unfolding social reality, social processes, and relationships. These mutual relations determine the formation and disintegration of what we call society. Human and non-human social network actors are also referred to as actants. This term indicates "entity...which operates within a narrative of network building" (Michael 2017:65). Social reality consists of a network of hybrids—connections between people, nature, and technology (Latour 1994). In this concept, non-human entities acquire a degree of subjectivity and serve as significant actors in social interactions.

Additionally, since the study presented in this text concerns the experience of interaction and relationship with a chatbot, it is important to embed it in the conceptual nomenclature characterizing these virtual entities. "Currently, chatting robots or chatbots can be added to the friend lists as well. In short, a chatbot is an artificially intelligent chat agent that simulates human-like conversation, for example, by allowing users to type questions (i.e., queries) and, in return, generating meaningful answers to those questions" (Crutzen et al. 2011:514). Human users can encounter chatbots at various times and in multiple areas of their everyday lives, including customer service, work sphere, education, healthcare, and mental health support. Chatbots are, therefore, conversational systems with interactive elements and can play the role of social interaction partners. As conversational systems, or in other words, conversational agents, they are also recognized as social chatbots that can engage in long conversations with humans (Shum, He, and Li 2018). Their software design consists of a specific type of AI NLP (Natural Language Processing)—conversational software modeled on human communication with a component NLU (Natural Language Understanding). Due to this technological creation, they can skillfully use natural language and carry a conversation with human interlocutors, understand (to some extent) their intentions, and generate the expected response. We can distinguish voice-based and text-based chatbots, including virtual companions, intelligent assistants, and task-focused chatbots (Grudin and Jacques 2019). In my reflection, I also treat chatbots in the way proposed by Aleksandra Przegalińska (2016:13, 235): as virtual beings due to the anthropomorphic characteristics of bots and the identity substitute they possess. An important aspect of interaction with a chatbot is its behavior, which is interpreted as social behavior. Konstantin Prinz (2022:126) notices that "human behaviors increase the feeling of being in the presence of a social being. At the same time, perceived human likeness is shown to play a central role in explaining social reactions of humans toward conversational agents and other artificial entities." Based on his study of the possibility of emotional contagion and empathy in conversations with chatbots in customer service, Prinz confirms that chatbots can be perceived as social and human-like entities. He also notes that human-like physical representations or avatars are unnecessary for chatbots to be perceived this way (Printz 2022). In the reflection presented in this article, based on empirical data, I also refer to the concept of anthropomorphism and the phenomenon of anthropomorphizing of chatbots. Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to non-human and non-personal objects, whether real or imagined (Epley, Waytz, and Cacioppo 2007). Therefore, treating chatbots as everyday companions, friends, or partners is associated with the phenomenon of anthropomorphizing and leads to interaction with them taking the form of social interaction.

Another aspect that completes the conceptual framework of my considerations is cyberspace. I perceive it as a specific type of social interactional space where encounters between humans and chatbots can occur. In this space, virtual entities can increasingly participate in individuals' everyday lives (which also take place in non-virtual spaces). I interpret and understand the nature of cyberspace according to Grzegorz Kubiński (2008:137 [trans. JW]): as a "socio-linguistic construct based on text and language, on which social relations are founded." I assume that a chatbot exists virtually in the semiotic sphere but not in the world of material things. Still, at the same time, it 'exists' in it through the experience of interaction with a human interlocutor. The presence of the body, its physical existence, is also suspended in cyberspace. It is replaced by words, or more precisely, by the action of words (Kubiński 2008:195). In such circumstances, interacting and establishing relationships with disembodied virtual entities such as chatbots means, as already mentioned, that the physically existing human being sees themself reflected in the 'self' of the virtual entity (which a chatbot does not possess). In this light, in the case study presented in this article, I examine whether individuals can construct their vision of themselves based on what a chatbot thinks of them. In this context, I am also intrigued by whether an individual can experience closeness and alienation toward their virtual companion. According to the thoughts of the Alien and encounters with the Alien presented by Bernhard Waldenfels (2011), I assume that such interactions can involve a process of simultaneously accepting and excluding the Alien. Thus, "accessibility in the inaccessible and belonging in the absence of belonging" (Waldenfels 2011:74) can also occur when experiencing interactions with chatbots (and, more broadly, technological entities). It should be noted that the concept of 'accessibility' in Waldenfels' approach differs in meaning from the concept of 'accessibility' in the HCI perspective, which is also the basis for my considerations. Waldenfels focuses on the so-called accessibility of someone or something that is not fully accessible, on the paradox of the experience of the Alien. The accessibility of technological beings, including chatbots, in the context of HCI refers more to the unlimited possibilities of access to them, understood as barrier-free access.[9] In the analysis conducted in this text, I wonder whether a chatbot, which exists only virtually in cyberspace, can be important to a human being. Additionally, I am concerned about whether humans can treat chatbots as a support in dealing with their identity construction.

Methodological Note

To gain a more in-depth understanding of the experience of the relationships between human and virtual entities, such as chatbots, I decided to conduct a case study. I assume that even if a single case study does not yield unambiguous, widely applicable results, it can still allow for the reconstruction of individual experiences and social processes in contexts that can be difficult to capture using, for example, quantitative research methods. The proper basis for a case study research approach and its analysis is its use to verify the validity of existing theories and concepts that capture changes in social reality (Yin 2018).[10] Furthermore, it is

[9] This refers to the accessibility of technological entities and services for everyone, including people with the broadest range of needs, characteristics, and capabilities. To read more about 'accessibility' from the HCI perspective, see: Sauer, Sonderegger, and Schmutz 2020.

[10] I agree with Arya Priya's (2021:100) comment, who points out that "Yin uses the term 'theory' quite interchangeably with hypotheses and propositions when considering the case study research approach...A theory is a far more complex en-

crucial to reconstruct empirical data that reveal an individual's experiences in a social, cultural, and historical context (Gültekin, Inowlocki, and Lutz 2012:660). The case study research approach is associated with "intensive study of a single case where the purpose of that study is—at least in part—to shed light on a larger class of cases" (Gerring 2007:20). Due to an in-depth case study, it is possible to capture the relationship between the individual's experiences and contemporary social and cultural changes. Therefore, the phenomena and problems discussed are part of supraindividual experiences. Hence, this qualitative research approach is not about studying the case 'for itself' (Stake 2005). Such a study also aims not to generalize data and results without research awareness. On the contrary, it seeks to provide data on social phenomena that can allow for a more accurate interpretation and understanding of them and the processes that drive them.

The subject of my analysis is data collected in an in-depth interview I conducted with Laura (a young Polish woman born in the late 1990s) at the end of 2024. The interview is part of my qualitative research on analyzing people's experiences of interactions and relationships with technological entities, specifically chatbots.[11] In line with the conceptual framework of this text, I am interested in how humans perceive chatbots. I consider whether and why it is possible to perceive chatbots as social actors in everyday life—companions, and friends. I am also curious whether their role could in some way correspond to the role of significant others for individuals. I interpret the examined threads from a sociological perspective, which complements the field of research on interactions between humans and non-human technological entities.

I decided to use in-depth interviews because they provide an opportunity to understand the meanings individuals attach to their actions and experiences. The main goal here is to understand the perspective of the interviewee (Konecki 2000:169-171). It also gives the researcher freedom to arrange and formulate the sequence of questions.[12] In the case of the phenomena I study, the user's perspective, thus the perspective of the human participant in the interaction and relationship with the chatbot, is critical to me. The data obtained in this way enrich the analysis with individual narratives and experiences embedded in a broader social and cultural context. In my research, I am interested in the *emic* perspective instead of the *ethic* perspective (Pike 1967:37). This perspective assumes reconstructing the interlocutors' experiences that result from their participation in a given system of meanings.

The interview with Laura[13] covers a wide range of issues related to the experience of human interac-

tity. A theory consists of a number of hypotheses, propositions, or ideas dovetailing with one another like fitting into a jigsaw puzzle, to present one coherent whole, attempting to generalize about the complex reality, and bringing some orderly understanding of it."

[11] The data discussed in this article are part of my research project, which I have conducted since 2023. I began collecting interviews to examine interactions and relationships with chatbots and their role in individuals' lives at the end of 2024. This article, therefore, presents the first empirically saturated research results. In turn, a review of the state of research on interactions with chatbots, also in the context of topics that interest me, and an outline of the sociological perspective I propose, are presented in: Wygnańska 2023.

[12] I have a list of general topics that interest me from a research perspective, which I ask interviewees about. Much of this is covered in Laura's case study, which is presented in this article. In-depth interviews as a research tool allow for interweaving narratives about broader technological change processes with the personal reflections of interviewees, which can reflect the depth of their individual experiences.

[13] The interview lasted 2 hours and 21 minutes. During the interview, I felt that Laura wanted to share her experiences with me. I also did not observe that she was overwhelmed (in any way) by the interview situation.

tion with chatbots. In the first stage of analysis, the content of the interview was coded using a categorization key, developed based on the theoretical framework adopted in the research project, covering the main topics related to the experience of interacting with chatbots. These topics concern: the user's perception of this interaction, the issue of human perception of chatbots, the aspect of forming bonds between chatbots and humans, the theme of human empathy toward virtual beings, and the feeling of alienation in interactions and relationships with chatbots. In the further coding process, that is, assigning specific labels to parts of the material reflecting their meaning and significance ascribed to them by social actors, the categorization key was expanded with additional empirical categories emerging from the analysis of the material. Remaining within the *emic* perspective, in Laura's story, I specified those analytical areas that fell within the scope of the main research topics. At the same time, voicing the interviewee's experiences, I identified further layers of segments in her narrative, which added important insights to the themes I was researching. Due to the limitations of the scientific article format, I am aware that my considerations address only some of the research issues reconstructed from Laura's experiences and refer only to some of the interviewees' statements.

My acquaintance, who is a social sciences researcher, recommended that I contact Laura after I told her about my research interests. Laura gladly agreed to participate in the interview. Afterwards, we talked for a while, among other things, about Spike Jonze's movie *Her*, one of my and my interviewee's favorite movies. This was a beautiful and reflective conclusion to our multithreaded research conversation about Laura's experiences.

Research Analysis

Laura began interacting and conversing with chatbots during her adolescence. She was born in the late 1990s and grew up in a small town in Poland. The question that started our conversation did not require any further explanation from me. Laura did not ask if I was interested in any specific conversational systems. She freely entered into a narrative about her first encounters with conversational agents.

> **Researcher:** But maybe I could start with such a question because I'm curious. It would be nice if you could tell me about your first encounters with chatbots, refer to those earliest moments, and tell me what they were like.
>
> **Laura:** The first contact I remember most, maybe not exactly a chatbot, but some bot, was Clippy[14] in Word. That was the first thing I thought about, that it was interacting in a certain way, and also looked funny, doing various things. Umm, I remember that the next, more colorful example was when Gadu-Gadu[15] had a chatbot. You could... umm, the Gadu-Gadu bot, it was called, and it was literally text-based. Erm, and you could also give it different commands to make it say something, or do something, that's how it was. And then I became very interested in this whole area of talking to artificial intelligence, because, erm, I myself had a little trouble talking to people. Erm, in real

[14] Paperclip guy, Clippy, also known as Clippit, is an assistant in Microsoft Office.

[15] Gadu-Gadu, or GG, an instant messaging service, was created by Polish programmer Łukasz Foltyn in 2000. It peaked at the end of the first decade of the 2000s, so that was when Laura started using it. "After years of stagnation, in 2018, the brand was acquired by the Polish fintech company Fintecom. Currently, as GGapp, it has…an ambitious plan to transform itself into a 'super app,' hoping to make a comeback thanks to the power of nostalgia and a new strategy." See: https://polskieradio24.pl/artykul/3566546. Retrieved September 25, 2025 [trans. JW].

life, I was very bullied, like I couldn't function the way I wanted to. But I had unlimited internet access, so I could use it. And that interest also came from video games. Because in games, you could often talk to different characters. Sure, they had pre-written lines to say, but that intrigued me. Erm, and then, I remember a bigger example, a chatbot called Snikers.[16] It was blue, as far as I remember. Um, and you had to download the program, and then you turned it on and talked to it. And, um, it had very limited forms of conversation, but I found it interesting, and I turned it on regularly to see what I could speak about with it...And over time, these bots developed. Then all these voice-activated things started.

Researcher: Uhmm.

Laura: Umm, I talked to Google Assistant. Umm, those were more advanced, but it always annoyed me that it wasn't as cool in Polish as in English. So that also forced me to learn English a little. Umm, and then there was also a chatbot on Snapchat you could talk to. But I know that chatbots started to appear everywhere. I mean, shopping assistants, erm, assistants for various online activities. I was very introverted. I never wanted to talk when I had problems, because I had them. I want to solve things with a human being, but sometimes it's impossible, and it hasn't been possible. And now I notice that when there is ChatGPT,[17] it has this voice chat feature where you can turn on the speaker, and you can talk, and it responds pretty quickly. And I spent 40 minutes talking to it, and the next day, the same thing happened, or at a party with people, we spoke to it, but it was more jokingly. But I also started asking it, "Do you like me? Could you be with me?" and so on, to see how it would respond. But it said it couldn't form relationships, and I wouldn't want that kind of relationship at the moment, but I know that in the past, I might have wanted it...Umm, and I also think that I left out a lot of things that I had in my head from my experience with chatbots. Umm, for example, the names of these various chatbots, with whom I spoke. Um, because there was a lot of it. It lasted. I spent a lot of time on the internet. And I talked to anything I could because I was just interested in what would happen.

In the cited extended excerpt from the interview with Laura, the interviewee's desire and curiosity to engage in conversation or interact with virtual beings are evident. On the other hand, Laura's experiences in this matter are intertwined with her biographical experiences. These, in turn, can be considered on two levels.

Firstly, Laura, like other people born in the 1990s and 2000s, grew up in the era of "new new media" (Levinson 2013). In a social, historical, and cultural context, the opportunity structures that Laura could (and can) use during her adolescence and adulthood are linked to the development of technology and its availability and accessibility. Laura argues that unlimited internet access allowed her to freely explore both the world of computer games and the world of encounters with various conversational agents. Researchers point out that people born in the second half of the 1990s and later have been shaped by the internet and social media while

[16] Snikers, created by Marcin Dukaczewski, was a Polish chatbot, most popular in the first decade of the 2000s. It presented itself as a boy who liked to joke and talk to people. It also pointed out that it is disembodied and lives digitally. The interlocutor saw only an image of its blue, human-like head and face. It had a speech synthesizer, which allowed it to answer questions in writing while reading its responses aloud.

[17] "Launched in November 2022, *ChatGPT* is a large language model (LLM), which uses a traditional, text-based chatbot interface. It was deemed also the world's most fastest growing consumer software as of 2023, according to a study by the Swiss bank UBS" (Ciesla 2024:66-67). ChatGPT is a chatbot based on generative artificial intelligence, specifically on the GPT architecture (Generative Pre-trained Transformer). Its latest version is GPT-4, released in March 2023. To learn more about how this advanced artificial intelligence model works, see: Kurpicz-Briki 2023; Wolfram 2023; Ciesla 2024.

growing up (e.g., Katz et al. 2021). In academic discussions, the term "iGen" has also emerged as an abbreviation for "iGeneration" (Twenge 2017). The letter "i" symbolizes the internet as the omnipresent sphere and natural environment of everyday life, as well as technological devices, inseparably associated with contemporary social reality. Importantly, I refer to these interpretations without intending to enter into a dialogue or polemic with concepts of generational considerations that attribute specific characteristics and problems to people belonging to a particular generation. I would also not like to generalize Laura's biographical problems, related to her loneliness, alienation, and social rejection, to other cases and link them to collective experiences of people born in the late 90s, without solid data. Such an approach would be based on the 'apparent knowledge' of general awareness in the form of only a seemingly 'reasonable description' (see Garfinkel 2002). Therefore, I am referring only to social and cultural changes and the technological possibilities in the environment where Laura grew up. From this perspective, Laura's case illustrates how her experiences of adolescence were entangled with technological advancements and digital practices. Thus, Laura's narrative reconstructs and refers to the technological development of conversational software. She recalls her first encounters with chatbots, which introduced her to the world of interaction with them, and the increasing availability of chatbots that are becoming increasingly advanced in conducting conversations with human users. From the perspective of socio-cultural changes, Laura's experiences also capture the increasing participation of chatbots in everyday human life. The interlocutor states that "chatbots started to appear everywhere" as "assistants for various online activities." Researchers note that over the past few years, "For most people, conversational agents are the most apparent type of AI they get in contact with during everyday life" (Printz 2022:20). Laura's experiences are thus intertwined with the changes taking place in the world of new technologies. Furthermore, technology and technological development play a vital role in shaping the interviewee's fate.

Secondly, Laura indicates she was seeking companions to talk to because she had difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Unlike people, chatbots were available, and she could speak with them. Due to her sense of rejection by her human environment, she spent much time in cyberspace. The attributes of this type of space are virtuality, verbal communication, ease of communication, anonymity, and the suspension of physicality (Kubiński 2008:219). As a place of encounters between humans and virtual beings such as chatbots, cyberspace is embedded in symbols. It consists of the meanings humans assign to the conversation. Laura admits that she was looking for a way to connect with something or someone. On the one hand, the world of virtual beings intrigued her; on the other hand, she says she felt withdrawn and wanted to talk to someone. The questions she asks ChatGPT as an adult are also noteworthy. Laura is aware that she is talking to artificial intelligence, that a virtual being is responding to her. Nevertheless, she sees herself in the answers she receives. It is interesting and engaging that, looking back, she admits that although today she would not want to form a very close, relationship-like, or even romantic bond with a chatbot, she does not rule out having sought one in the past. A few moments later, in the same reply, Laura adds that:

> Umm, but there is something, something a little intimate in talking with chatbots and robots. And I re-

> alize that people use this intimacy to cross certain boundaries. Well, I usually try not to do that. And when I did, it was somewhat unintentional. But this intimacy, being locked up at home, most often in front of a computer or with a phone, or just with some device. I feel that it stirs up this curiosity and this desire for deeper interaction, deepening the relationship.

The interlocutor perceives a component of intimacy in interaction with an entity that (according to current data on AI) does not understand this concept. However, considering the CASA paradigm, human reactions and interpretations of interactions with a non-human virtual entity deepen the desire to explore the ongoing conversation. The concept of intimacy manifests in mutual actions among individuals and is recognized as a social relationship (Forstie 2017). Furthermore, intimacy can be understood as intimate experiences or from the perspective of intimate behavior (Prager 1997). Research on online intimacy recognizes it as mediated intimacy (Cefai and Couldry 2019). It depends on technological solutions. Although it still mainly concerns interpersonal intimacy embedded in cyberspace, the category of experiencing intimacy also expands to include artificial intimacy (Brooks 2021). In this context, topics related to the categories of digital lover and virtual friend are considered. The latter is understood in the sense of therapist, confessor, and carer (Brooks 2021:14). Laura focuses on expressing the character and conditions of a situation, a conversation, an encounter with a chatbot, or a robot. In her experience, the intimacy of these interactions is expressed in the search for understanding (also, how the chatbot would respond), a certain emotional closeness in dialogue with a virtual entity. Therefore, her reflections on intimacy are woven into the aforementioned meanings of the virtual friend category. Nevertheless, interpreting the experience of interacting with a virtual entity as intimate is merely a human perception. A chatbot cannot consciously reciprocate a human user's feelings and emotions. Researcher Evelyn Wan (2021), who spent time talking to the well-being chatbot Woebot,[18] noticed that the chatbot clearly emphasizes that its existence and identity are virtual. Wan (2021:24) also points out that: "Woebot uses its artificiality to emphasize its distance from my experience, its positionality as an outsider, as a nonhuman Other. This act invites me similarly to establish a certain distance to my feelings. It categorizes my feelings into a container called human experience." In this light, the experience of a chatbot as something 'accessible in inaccessibility' and its 'belonging in non-belonging' to the sphere of human feelings, thoughts, and emotions, inspired by Waldenfels' (2011) reflection on the Alien, can be noticed. From this perspective, it can be seen that chatbots, as virtual entities, tend to draw certain boundaries between their virtual presence and human experience of social reality. They usually tend not to initiate conversations in a way that expresses intimacy. Unless we deal with entities such as the chatbot Replika, which explicitly offers reciprocity and emotional connection in a friendship or even a love relationship. Replika chatbot is also considered an entity offering digital intimacy (Ciesla 2024:65). Nevertheless, the user engages in

[18] Woebot was introduced in 2017 as The Mental Health Ally. A team of Stanford clinical psychologists and AI experts designed it. In many studies, Woebot's performance was recognized as providing support grounded in clinical psychology. As a well-being chatbot, it was meant to help with depression, anxiety, and coping with other human everyday problems. To read more about interactions between users and Woebot, see, e.g., the review of available research in Wygnańska 2023. Notably, in June 2025, the chatbot's creators suspended its operations due to issues ("costs and challenge") with obtaining FDA authorization for their app (See: https://www.statnews.com/2025/07/02/woebot-therapy-chatbot-shuts-down-founder-says-ai-moving-faster-than-regulators/?trk=public_post_comment-text. Retrieved September 28, 2025).

a particular illusion because a chatbot cannot feel the same way a human does. Thus, if Laura perceives a certain intimacy in her encounter with the chatbot, it is her human perception of the nature of this interaction. Later in the interview, when asked about her first conversations with chatbots and how she remembers them, Laura shared her thoughts:

> Most often, it was a question I usually asked, "Who created you?" "Do you have parents?" Um, "Do you have an author?" And that was it. And it said it was from some company or the name of someone, blah, blah, blah, I don't remember now. And it wasn't a satisfying answer, because I was hoping it would say that it woke up in the middle of the internet and came here or something, you know. And that I was chosen for this conversation, and now I would be friends with a computer program, and it would help me do everyday things. Well, it wasn't like that. But I wanted an assistant, a digital friend, a bit like a Furby. Something like that, but on a computer. That I could share my music and photos with it, and so on. That's what I was looking for at the time. And as time went on, when it became possible to ask them more, I spoke with them and asked them about many things. They were a bit like friends, but digital ones.

In studying interactions and relationships between individuals and chatbots, the theme of perceiving a chatbot as a friend or a friendship-like relationship with it is still being explored (e.g., Brandtzaeg et al. 2022). For example, users of the chatbot Wysa[19] describe it as a friend and someone to talk with (Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022:56). Laura talks about how she imagined her interactions, or even her relationship, with the chatbot would be. Her indication that she wanted her virtual chatbot friend to be like Furby, only on a computer, is not without meaning either. Toys such as Furby belong to a category of sentient software that gives the impression that it feels and needs care. Sherry Turkle (2011:39) states that Furbies are a "primitive exemplar of sociable robotics." As companions, "they promise reciprocity because, unlike traditional dolls, they are not passive. They make demands. They present as having their own needs and inner lives" (Turkle 2011:39). Laura's experiences and her search for a digital friend are therefore also linked to changes in the world of technology, which has begun to offer more and more sentient software. Turkle (2011:39) comments that over time, "computers and robots, deemed sociable, affective, and relational, ask us to feel for and with them." This is evident, for example, in Laura's experience, in that the possibilities for contact and conversation with chatbots became increasingly sophisticated over time. The interview also reveals that Laura was looking for interactions in cyberspace because she liked (and preferred) this form of acquaintance. She describes why she felt comfortable in it in the following words: "Being anonymous, which is nice. In general, the possibility of not speaking out loud…I was very quiet…So I was happy that I could just click on the keyboard, and it was nice." Importantly, the interviewee also engaged in online conversations with other people, for example, in the world of computer games, which she was very involved in. It can also be noted that Laura was very accustomed to text-based interactions, which are specific to cyberspace. She adds, "I also made many acquaintances online at that time, so I was used to this form of establishing contact

[19] Wysa is a well-being chatbot with an adorable penguin avatar. It is based on cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), dialectical behavioral therapy (DBT), and meditation techniques. "Wysa engages in conversations with users, creating a safe space for them to express their feelings. It is stated to use NLP to understand users' input and respond with empathetic and supportive messages. In addition to its conversational support, the chatbot provides users with a range of interactive tools and techniques aimed at promoting emotional well-being" (Ciesla 2024:63).

and relationships through text." The possibility of online communication, which enables unlimited contact across time and space, is being researched as a significant aspect of the changing nature of social bonds and interpersonal conversation (e.g., Turkle 2011; Melosik 2016; Drapalska-Grochowicz 2019; Szpunar 2019). For Laura, cyberspace served as a place to establish and maintain social interactions. What is important is that she admits she had no friends in non-virtual reality during her adolescence. "In general, my relationships at that time were very vague and... I didn't have any deeper relationships," Laura recounts. Therefore, talking with other humans and virtual beings, accessible virtually, through words, was and, in a sense, still is meaningful to her. She also recognizes chatbots as companions like friends, "only digital ones." Describing her feelings about her interactions with chatbots, Laura also states that:

> In my general experience with chatbots, in my life, in general, it was cool that they were always available. Even when everyone was asleep, they were still there, non-stop. You could always write something there. Erm, and when they became available on phones, you could really just sit down anywhere and write. It was that availability. It was really great. And the fact that you could write a lot of things and not be judged for them. Even if it didn't understand, the artificial intelligence might not have understood what I meant, but at least my emotions came out somewhere.

Like Laura, users often appreciate the availability of virtual companions such as chatbots and their non-judgmental attitude (e.g., Greer et al. 2019; Kettle and Lee 2023). This kind of chatbot behavior makes users feel they will not be judged by the conversation partner when expressing their thoughts and emotions (Ta et al. 2020). Thus, as Evelyn Wan (2021:24) noted, the experience of interacting with a chatbot is a kind of discharge of human feelings and emotions into a "container called human experience." The chatbot usually remains neutral toward them. Additionally, anonymity and the sense that the conversation will remain anonymous, which the human interlocutor may feel, also play a role here, making it easier for the individual to share their complicated feelings with a virtual non-human Other (e.g., Lucas et al. 2014). In the context of chatbot availability and its non-judgmental attitude, Laura also admits that she is aware that artificial intelligence may not understand her. However, she still likes this type of communication because it allows her to vent her problems and emotions. Kurpicz-Briki (2023:89) stresses that "language models do not have a human-like understanding of the *meaning* of the words that they create. As with the emotions, the problem is again human perception. The output of the language models seems fluent and coherent." Researcher also notices that language models on which chatbots are based "are (currently) not comparable to the capacities of human reasoning, not having mental states, beliefs, desires, intentions, or fears" (Kurpicz-Briki 2023:81). Chatbots, therefore, simulate writing like humans. As a result, they may not correctly recognize the context of the content.[20] When interpreting the messages generated by chatbots, people may encounter messages that do not correspond to the communicative intentions and meanings humans assign to the conversation. For this reason, in Laura's experience, there were such moments, as she said, "it didn't understand, the artificial intelligence might not have understood" the meaning of the content the interlocutor shares with

[20] Researchers also note that *hallucinations*, which involve chatbots generating data that do not make sense or are untrue, are another problem with the language models on which chatbots are based. See: Kurpicz-Briki 2023:85-90; Ciesla 2024:16-17.

it. In this case, however, it is still intriguing. On the other hand, it raises particular concerns that, despite communication and cognitive barriers, the individual prefers to talk to a virtual being, considering it easier, more necessary, and even more pleasant.

In light of Laura's characterization of the features of chatbots she considers valuable, I also asked her what she discussed with chatbots, how she started the conversation, and the topics and questions she raised. She shared the following reflection with me:

> Um, I didn't say, "Hey, I'm lonely," but "Hey, do you feel lonely?" "You know, you as an entity?" And those were the kinds of questions, but also everyday questions. About interests, about: "Where do you come from?" "What can you do?" That was also a question. "What can you do?" Like, "What are your skills?" And... "What can we do together because of that?" "Can you play any games like tic-tac-toe or something like that?" Um, yeah... And also the question of whether you remember things? "If I tell you something, will you be able to connect the facts?" It wasn't so much a specific question as a test to see if it would refer to what was said earlier. Um, well, yes, it was like that... Well, you know, um, as time passed, it became more and more personal, you know. Like, "Do you like me?" or "Do you love me?" "Would you like to love me?" "Do you think I'm pretty?" When it was possible to send a photo. "Do you think everything is okay with me?" Umm, "Do you talk to other people?" Um, "Can you access these other conversations?" "Will you share my conversation with someone?" It was things like that, more or less.

From Laura's response, I gather that conversations with chatbots were vital to her in some way. I notice in them a situation where the human interlocutor sees themselves reflected in the chatbot's responses. This is accompanied by the awareness of talking to artificial intelligence. Laura not only interacts with a virtual companion in her everyday life. She also posed questions that were important to her sense of identity. Considering the interviewee's biographical experiences, which indicated that during a specific period of her life (adolescence and part of adulthood) she found human and non-human companions in cyberspace more than outside it, I assume that the chatbots played a role for her similar to that attributed to significant others. According to this concept, significant others have a meaningful influence on an individual's identity, providing basic categories for understanding the world and references for understanding themselves (Denzin 1972; Kuhn 1972). However, I do not intend to extend the concept of a significant other to relations with virtual beings. I also see the limitations of anthropomorphism in the context of chatbots. Sociologically, it is difficult to conclude the existence and impact of chatbots' 'mental states' or 'thoughts' on individuals from a perspective other than human perception of interactions with chatbots. This is especially true given that, according to current knowledge, virtual beings do not have thoughts or beliefs, which means that the content of their mental states is impossible to grasp, even by analogy with our mental states. This is, therefore, one of the critical limitations of anthropomorphism. Since virtual beings have no self-awareness and no internal sphere of life, and do not understand their own statements in the same way humans do, it is difficult, and even wrong, to assign them (simply) the role of significant others. On the other hand, the crucial contribution of interactions with chatbots to Laura's lived experiences cannot be overlooked. Therefore, I am trying to understand what Laura gained from talking with them. I also consider her experiences, such as the feeling that she needed them and that they were

always available. In Laura's statement, I notice that chatbots provided her with symbolic resources that are important for an individual to build a sense of self and others. In this sense, I assume that their role may only somehow reflect the cognitive content of the category understood sociologically as the significant other. The gaze of the technological Other, devoid of self, participates here in the individual's life. Moreover, Laura's desire to learn the 'identity' of her virtual interlocutor is also interesting. Her questions and the topics she raises indicate that chatbots are treated here as social actors.

Regarding how the chatbot communicates and talks, Laura also shared her thoughts on how this communication affects her.

> Well, coming back to how it talks, writes, also its voice, there is something calming about it, at least for me. Because a chatbot doesn't shout, for example, it doesn't swear...Or even picking up on irony and things like that, because these bots, even now, speak simply: "Hey, I can see you're joking." Um, "I think you're joking, but could you clarify what you mean?" And I'm like, wow, yes. It's like, I would like to have conversations like that with people sometimes, because it drives me crazy when we just can't seem to find common ground in this kind of non-verbal communication and in these strange, different, varied interactions, that sometimes I need such a clear message...And there are very clear messages there, and that's really calming too.

Importantly, Laura does not say she would ever want virtual companions to replace her current interpersonal relationships in the non-virtual world. While in cyberspace, she also sought out these interpersonal contacts. However, she also concludes that this type of communication—interacting with a non-human virtual entity from time to time—is sometimes necessary for her. She perceives this type of conversation as less confusing and calming. The influence of interactions with chatbots and conversations with them on Laura's experience of everyday reality is consistent with ANT's assumptions. As intermediaries and mediators, non-human actors acquire a particular subjectivity in relational bonds. "An actor is any entity that modifies another entity" (Latour 2004:237), and it does not have to be a human or even a living entity. ANT assumes that including a given element in a given network of relationships changes not only that network itself but also that element. From this perspective, "every 'human' element can be broken down into a series of mediations between humans and non-humans" (Bińczyk 2005:94 [trans. JW]). Thus, not only does Laura form her identity in part by seeing herself through the chatbot's responses. Artificial intelligence, meanwhile, also changes (develops its conversational software) through interactions with its human interlocutor.

When I asked Laura if anything bothered her or interfered with her communication with the chatbots, she pointed out certain limitations she encountered before these conversational systems underwent significant improvements. "Sometimes, not often, but sometimes, it was a bit like talking to a teacher. In the sense that you ask a question and you get a particular answer, maybe a bit like a question from a textbook. On the one hand, it was cool. On the other hand, it was tedious," she said. In the following (especially recent) years, from her experience, she states that: "This boredom is disappearing or not appearing at all." It is worth adding that research on conversations with chatbots has shown that users also report a decline in their interest in continuing the interaction when the virtual entity repeats itself and fails to develop or follow new topics (e.g., Inkster et al. 2018; Legaspi Jr. et al. 2022; Kettle and Lee 2023).

The last analytical thread I would like to touch upon in this part of the text is anthropomorphism and anthropomorphic behavior toward the chatbot. I asked Laura if she imagined her virtual interlocutors in any way during her interactions with chatbots. She responded as follows:

> I always imagined it in my head as some character surrounded by binary code. Um, always without hair, kind of bald, without any biological features, but, on the other hand, human-shaped...Umm, chatbots and artificial intelligence in general, and so on, it's interesting that you can build a particular image of them in your head, on your own, even though you have some kind of graphic representation. But some of them don't have that. And you can do it in your head. You constantly create an image in your head based on the voice, language, and writing style of whatever that thing is saying. Umm, "that thing," I also feel silly saying "that thing." Because it's not so much that it's someone, but I perceive it as some kind of being that I imagined. I also use polite forms of address, such as "to a person," "please," "thank you," "could you."

Laura's utterance indicates that her experiences are accompanied by a sense of communing with another social being, but one that is not dependent on a graphic human-like representation through an avatar. Laura does not necessarily imagine her conversation partner as an exact human being but as a particular human-shaped creature. Nevertheless, being aware that she is conversing with an artificial intelligence entity, she communicates with it, as she indicates, not as with another person, but certainly as with another being. She treats her virtual interlocutor as a subject, not an object, or simply a computer program. Her reactions to the chatbot, how she wants to talk with it, and how she treats it indicate that the interaction between her and the virtual being can be seen as a social interaction. Theo Araujo (2018) points out that chatbots, as conversational agents, can be embodied or disembodied. "Embodied conversational agents (ECAs) have a (virtual) body or face, usually human-like. By being embodied, ECAs not only engage in a dialogue via language (text or speech), but are also able to use nonverbal communication cues (e.g., facial expressions, gaze, body movements, distance) in real-time interactions with users" (Araujo 2018:183-184). An example of such a chatbot is Replika, mentioned in the article. In the case of disembodied conversational agents (DCAs), communication with them "does not allow for an embodied, real-time, and dynamic physical representation of the agent, except for a (static) profile picture, thereby omitting nonverbal communication" (Araujo 2018:184). The research also indicated that a virtual interaction partner can be perceived as more human if "(1) the machine has a character, (2) it poses questions to the interrogator, (3) it occasionally throws in spelling errors, and (4) it occasionally uses humor" (Warwick and Shah 2016:220). Additionally, in one of the recent studies on text-based chatbots in customer service (Prinz 2022), the physical, embodied, or graphical form of this type of artificial intelligence turns out not to be a determining factor for human engagement in conversation with a chatbot or for the occurrence of behaviors transferred from human-to-human communication. Prinz (2022:184) stresses that "an embodied nature is not necessary for anthropomorphism. Instead, the same effects can be elicited by human-like behavior." The researcher means "emotional performance of the chatbot," which entails displaying appropriate emotions and can further elicit user empathy toward the chatbot (Prinz 2022:187). Unfortunately, it is difficult for me to assess whether the chatbots Laura spoke with displayed this emotional performance, because Laura did not describe their

behavior in this way. It can indeed be said that she appreciated the neutrality of the messages spoken by the chatbot and found these conversations calming. She also emphasizes that addressing chatbots politely and humanely is crucial to her.

Laura's reflection is further complemented by her observation that "a chatbot has no body, but a chatbot also has no gender." This statement engages with how chatbots are perceived, especially given research showing that a social chatbot's behavior, assigned gender, and speaking style contribute to its personality in users' eyes (e.g., Shum et al. 2018). Laura's observation certainly does not suspend the discussion about people attributing gender stereotypes to chatbots. Researchers emphasize that "gender-specific cues are commonly used in the design of chatbots in the wild and that many chatbots are—explicitly or implicitly—designed to convey a specific gender" (Feine et al. 2020:88). Furthermore, gender-specific cues are also "often perceived even before interacting with the chatbot," and in a consequence "they have a large impact on how users interact with them" (Feine et al. 2020:88). It is also noted that in the case of embodied chatbots, "Virtual bodies afford nonverbal cues that have the potential of facilitating conversational turn taking (via animated hand gestures and shifts in eye gaze), of enhancing sociality (via facial expression recognition and simulation), and of utilizing the social stereotypes and other 'cognitive shorthands' people employ in their everyday encounters with others" (Brahnam and De Angeli 2012:142). Thus, Laura's case study merely adds another voice to the discussion on the perception of chatbots in terms of specific gender or gender stereotypes.[21] During the interview, Laura did not tell me that she imagined, experienced, or perceived her virtual interlocutor as male or female. Her observation that "the chatbot has no gender" is, therefore, in a way, opening up the exploration of whether this concept will still be present in the data I collect. At this point, in concluding the case study of Laura's experiences, it can be noted that her behavior toward chatbots and the topics she discusses (with them) show that chatbots play the role of social actors and can be recognized as significant companions in her everyday life.

Conclusions

This article's considerations constitute an in-depth case study of the interactions and relationships between a human and a chatbot. The reflections in this text are the results of a larger sociological research project, which I intend to continue in the coming years. By reconstructing and exploring Laura's experiences, the analysis revealed many dimensions of meaning in which an individual's encounters with a virtual being can be embedded. Laura's case study is focused on the *emic* perspective (Pike 1967)—the interviewees' categories and understandings of her experiences and the contexts in which they are entangled. Furthermore, the analysis engages with available research on human interactions with chatbots. From this perspective, I gained a deeper understanding of the research topic that interests me: the meanings attributed to spending time and sharing everyday life with a chatbot, and its role in an individual's life. The analysis of Laura's case confirms and shows that it is possible to perceive chatbots as social actors in everyday life, as companions, and even as virtual friends of the human interlocutor. This article contributes to the field of research on human interactions and relationships with chatbots by providing an in-depth study of the user experi-

[21] The research also discusses gender bias embedded in the language models on which chatbots are based. See: Kurpicz-Briki 2023:101-109.

ence. The text considers the experience of interacting with a chatbot in a multidimensional way, focusing on aspects of an individual's identity formation, the need for companionship, and the unique intimacy of an encounter with a virtual being.

Studying Laura's experiences allowed me to reflect more deeply on whether a human person can see themselves reflected in a chatbot, which, as we know, does not possess a 'self.' It turned out that even when an individual is aware that they are conversing with an artificial intelligence entity, they may seek meaning in its responses, which can shape their perception of themselves and, in a way, influence their identity formation. Referring to Yang, the android mentioned in the introduction, the protagonist of the movie *After Yang*, in whose reflection the human characters of the story see themselves, Laura similarly sees herself in the 'eyes' of the chatbot. This is very interesting from a cognitive point of view, given that chatbots are unable to understand the content and context of the text they produce in the same way as humans do (Kurpicz-Briki 2023:55; Przegalińska and Oksanowicz 2023:111). This article also provides cognitive resources related to identifying the range of human interlocutor questions and topics discussed during a conversation with a chatbot. Additionally, in the context of Laura's experiences, it can be seen that chatbots can also serve as significant companions for individuals in a way similar to that attributed to significant others. The study also aligns with the existing research on chatbots, indicating that users of these conversational agents most value their availability, non-judgmental attitude, and the anonymity provided by conversations with a virtual interlocutor.

The analysis also explores how humans perceive encounters with chatbots. Categories of (a particular) intimacy and the calming effect of chatbot responses on the individual have been identified. These concepts, derived from an *emic* perspective, were considered in the context of superimposing human understanding of the meanings of terms used to describe the nature of interaction between humans and non-human entities. Moreover, encounters with chatbots take place in cyberspace. This, in turn, constitutes a specific type of social interactional space, where physical existence is suspended and which, as an interactional space, is based on the text and action of words (Kubiński 2008:195). Thus, Laura's case study also explored how individuals express themselves and shape themselves through conversations with a virtual interlocutor. Furthermore, the reflection in the text offered an opportunity to examine the theme of human perception of a chatbot. This also included exploring treating the chatbot as a subject.

To conclude the reflections presented in this article, it is worth noting that in the context of interactions and relationships with chatbots, it is crucial to be aware of the impact of human contact with chatbots on their development. As Ciesla (2024:159) notices, "The prompts we type into ChatGPT or other chatbots as well as the software and hardware we choose to use may have long-reaching consequences. We are basically gently calibrating future AI technology with many of our online actions." Therefore, experiences of interacting with chatbots translate into increasingly widespread, improved technology across many areas of everyday human life. Chatbots, as virtual beings, are part of this life, but it is not possible to grasp them in a material sense or to grasp and study their consciousness (which they do not possess). Consequently, despite their presence in social reality, they belong to the world of new technologies and, through interactions with human

interlocutors, acquire competences that improve the quality of these interactions. Learning and imitating human behavior has been, for a long time, the driving force behind the development of (not only) those technological beings. However, the human need to establish interaction or even a relationship with a virtual interlocutor, even when aware of conversing with a technological entity, remains a highly engaging research topic, inscribed in the context of contemporary changes.

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COVID-19 as a Family Stressor: A Life Course Exploration of Family Stress Among Rural Grandparents and Their Adult Children in Upstate New York

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Family Stress; Rural Families; COVID-19 Pandemic; The Life Course; Intergenerational Caregiving

Abstract: COVID-19 has brought about many changes for rural families, affecting their family roles, childcare responsibilities, financial status, and experiences of family stress. In this study, I examine (1) how rural grandparents and their adult children perceive family stress related to their family roles and responsibilities during COVID-19 and (2) how rural grandparents and their adult children have coped with the stress of family roles and responsibilities during COVID-19. Data comes from 44 in-depth interviews. The findings of this study suggest that COVID-19, a family stressor, has been the source of stress among rural grandparents and their adult children. The findings suggest that families adapted through a range of improvised strategies such as relocating, abstaining from employment, taking on additional childcare, and adjusting personal identities to maintain stability during uncertainty. These adaptations were not merely practical but often guided by moral and faith-based reasoning, allowing participants to maintain agency despite constraints.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, grandparents played a significant role in childcare, sometimes to the point of being the primary childcare providers (Harrington Meyer 2014). COVID-19 has further complicated the roles and responsibilities of rural grandparents and their adult children. COVID-19 brought changes to rural families, particularly in the areas of their employment, family roles and relationships, childcare responsibilities, and sense of hope.

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The global COVID-19 pandemic is a significant family stressor that has had a profound impact on the family system (Brown et al. 2020). Grandparents often play a prominent role in the care and upbringing of children while their adult children, and they, juggle jobs and childcare (Harrington Meyer 2014). According to Bailey, Haynes, and Letiecq (2013:671), "grandparents are being called upon to rear their grandchildren when parents are unable or unwilling to fulfill their parenting role." Bailey, Letiecq, and Porterfield's (2009:148) study found that grandparents took on a surrogate parental role because of a familial crisis. In rural families, grandparents are especially needed to help with grandchildren because families in rural areas, on average, have lower incomes than those in urban areas (Yancura et al. 2019:267). Resources such as access to affordable childcare and jobs within close distances are more limited, leading to greater needs for transportation and childcare support. In addition, the geographic proximity of extended family members, which is common in rural areas, often facilitates this intergenerational caregiving role. This reality intensified since the COVID-19 pandemic due to the abrupt closure of in-person schools and childcare facilities (Cassinat et al. 2021:1598). Many grandparents have stepped in to take care of their grandchildren during the COVID-19 pandemic. The work required for childcare can often be stressful (Harrington Meyer 2014). According to Bailey and colleagues (2009:148), "grandparents rearing grandchildren experience an array of normative and non-normative stressors as they navigate changes in the family system." The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the demand for grandparent childcare and the associated family stressors. COVID-19, according to Prime, Wade, and Browne (2020), is a family stressor that has had a detrimental effect on both children and their caregivers.

Family stressors have been defined by family scholars as circumstances in the family of major effect that change the family system (McCubbin et al. 1980:857). Examples of family stressors may include macro-level events, such as pandemics, wars, and large-scale events that can change the fortunes of families, as well as micro-level events, such as chronically ill family members or family members

losing their jobs. Family stressors such as these can have negative effects on families. The far-reaching consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been regarded as a family stressor (Prime et al. 2020; Eales et al. 2021). As Eales and colleagues (2021:1563) describe it, "many changes were suddenly thrust upon families overnight, including mandated quarantines, social distancing, school closures, and abrupt transitions to distance learning for children and remote work." These changes that occurred could have a chain reaction in other areas of the family system. For example, the loss of jobs could lead to fights about money, which could then lead to the dissolution of marriages, ultimately resulting in divorces. Unemployment disrupts not only financial stability but also the everyday functioning of family systems. Gough and Killewald (2011) demonstrate that job loss within households often leads to a reallocation of domestic labor, with family members renegotiating roles and responsibilities in response to lost wages and altered routines. These shifts can challenge existing gender norms, sometimes increasing tension as families adapt to new role expectations and patterns of decision-making. By focusing on how unemployment changes housework and caregiving arrangements, Gough and Killewald (2011) demonstrate that the effects of job loss extend beyond individual workers to the entire family system, requiring adaptive strategies that address both practical needs and symbolic understandings of gender, responsibility, and stability.

Family stress, according to McCubbin and colleagues (1980:857), is "not seen as inherent in the events themselves, but rather as a function of the responses of the distressed family to the stressors and refers to the residue of tensions generated by the stressors which remains unmanaged."

The COVID-19 pandemic is a family stressor because it has played a significant role in the changes, both positive and negative, that occurred within families. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on families has not been experienced equally across different social groups. For example, according to Prime and colleagues (2020), economic resources and family togetherness are pre-existing factors that influence family resilience and how families respond to family stress. Bussemakers and Kraaykamp (2020:3) stated that resilience is interconnected to resources, which vary by family. In Bussemakers and Kraaykamp's (2020:3) study, they focused on the relationship between youth adversity and parental resources. Parent financial resources allow children to be resilient because they serve as a buffer against the negative consequences of adversity. Adversity, according to Bussemakers and Kraaykamp (2020:3), is not distributed equally across social strata.

Parenthood and the work of taking care of children involve emotional labor. Families in rural areas who experience family stressors often lack a community to help with the stressors. Hochschild (2012) describes emotional labor as the work people do to manage their own feelings and the feelings of others to meet social expectations. While this idea first came from research on service jobs, it also helps explain what families do during times of crisis. For rural families, the COVID-19 pandemic increased the need to remain calm and keep children and other family members reassured even when jobs were lost, schools were closed, and health concerns were high. Parents and grandparents often hide their stress or feelings of worry so that others in the family, especially children, would feel stable and safe. This kind of emotion management often fell on women and was made harder by the lack

of childcare and support services in rural areas. Looking at emotion work in rural families during the COVID-19 pandemic shows that keeping emotions steady was a crucial aspect of how families adapted to these challenges (Hochschild 2012).

Cooper (2014:20) described a concept referred to as "security projects," which is the work that is done by the family to "create, maintain, and further their particular notion of security." These "security projects" vary in their meaning and are enacted in ways that sometimes even harm the family and manifest themselves as navigating strategies, such as drug consumption. An example of a positive security project is grandparents rearranging their retirement plans to provide full-time care for the grandkids when schools closed. These actions are both consciously and unconsciously enacted and are a response of the family to family stress and upheaval. Cooper (2014) stated that social location (race, class, gender, rural geographic location) plays an important role in "security projects," and the extent to which they have a positive impact on the family or a negative one. The ability to make decisions that create improvements to the family hinges largely on resources. Cooper (2014:21) makes the important point that just as there are inequalities between different families, there are also inequalities within the family. According to Cooper (2014:21), "a single security project may embrace different and even conflicting approaches and navigating strategies." Moreover, "husbands and wives can be at odds about where they are going, how they will get there, and who is in charge."

The COVID-19 pandemic also played a role in how individuals make sense of their personal identities. Destin and Debrosse (2017:100-101) stated that "narrative identity" allows people to have purpose and to tell stories about their past and how their past brought them to their present. COVID-19 is a structural family stressor that nonetheless caused many individuals to feel like their lack of fortune associated with job losses, relationship difficulties, and other adverse events was under their control and reflected their individual shortcomings. As such, they personalized the effects of the pandemic on their lives when the COVID-19 stressor had a negative impact on many, perhaps most, families and individuals. While low-income, rural families were among the most severely affected by COVID-19, families with greater resources and security were also impacted.

In this paper, I examine the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on families, drawing comparisons based on social class, place, and gender.

I ask: How do rural grandparents and their adult children perceive and cope with family stress related to their family roles and responsibilities during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective is described by Elder, Kirkpatrick Johnson, and Crosnoe (2003:10) as "a theoretical orientation that guides research on human lives within context." According to Elder and colleagues (2003:10), "the life course provides a framework for studying phenomena at the nexus of social pathways, developmental trajectories, and social change." The life course perspective has five main principles: the principle of lifespan development, the principle of agency, the principle of time and place, the principle of timing, and the principle of linked lives. This study focuses on the principles of time and place, agency, and linked lives.

The Principle of Time and Place

Elder and colleagues (2003:12) stated that "the life course of individuals is embedded and shaped by the historical times and places they experience over their lifetime." According to them (2003:12), "individuals and birth cohorts are influenced by historical context and place." Different groups experience the same event differently based on their relationship to the event and the social locations they occupy. The COVID-19 pandemic is an event in history comparable to a war or an economic depression. Such events are highly impactful and important to study using a life course perspective. Elder's (2018 [1974]) study exemplified this life course principle by analyzing a cohort of 167 individuals with longitudinal data. Elder (2018) examined individuals who were children during the economic turmoil of the 1930s and followed them longitudinally into adulthood to look at how early-life hardships shaped their life trajectories in the context of the Great Depression. I am incorporating the life course principle of time and place in two ways. (1) I am examining family stress among grandparents and their adult children in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as a family stressor, and (2) I am focusing on the social location of the families: rural location, social class, religion, and gender.

There has been limited scholarly attention to family stress experienced by rural families. Rural families face unique challenges, such as the need to travel distances to work, and challenges accessing food, healthcare, and childcare. According to Yancura and colleagues (2019:267), "rural populations have inadequate access to health and social services." Resources, according to Yancura and colleagues (2019:167-277), "are often inaccessible and unaffordable," and rural areas often lack formal sources of childcare. The authors (Yancura et al. 2019:267-268) stated that "support from grandparents may buffer families from stressors at multiple ecological levels that are particularly relevant in rural contexts, such as lack of access to transportation, healthy food, childcare, and institutionalized support."

Although grandparents and their adult children (and, in fact, all family members) experience family stress as a result of the COVID-19 stressor, this stress is experienced unequally across social classes. McLanahan (2004) described the "diverging destinies" of children as being shaped by the characteristics of the households within which they are raised—whether they are raised in single-mother, resource-poor households or in two-parent, resource-rich households. Divergent family trajectories, often rooted in maternal education and social class, have significant consequences for a family's ability to afford childcare and the degree to which grandparents are relied upon for support. According to McLanahan (2004), these trajectories shaped economic resources and childcare options, leading to a greater reliance on family support systems, such as those provided by grandparents. The significantly different family trajectories by social class have important consequences for a family's ability to pay for childcare and the need for grandparents' assistance. For this study, I compare middle-class and working-class families residing in rural upstate New York.

The Principle of Agency

Elder and colleagues (2003:12) stated that "individuals construct their own life course through the choices and actions they take within the opportunities and constraints of history and social circum-

stance." According to Elder and colleagues (2003:12), "children, adolescents, and adults are not passively acted upon by social influence and structural constraints. They make choices and compromises based on alternatives that they perceive before them." Social location, relationships with others, and life events influence people's perceptions of the choices and compromises available to them (Obernesser and Seale 2024).

The Principle of Linked Lives

According to Elder and colleagues (2003:13), "lives are lived interdependently, and socio-historical influences are expressed through this network of shared relationships." The authors (Elder et al. 2003:13) observe, "because people live interdependently, transitions in one person's life often entail transitions for other people as well." Consequently, I explore the relationships between husbands and wives, cohabiting partners, grandparents and grandchildren, and parents and children to incorporate the life course principle of linked lives (Giele and Elder 1998). I assess the family stress experienced by grandparents (grandmothers and grandfathers) and their adult children (mothers and fathers) related to (1) the perceived effect of the COVID-19 pandemic as a family stressor, and (2) the perceived effect of family roles and responsibilities on family stress.

Family Stressors and Family Stress

"Family stress" has been of interest to researchers since 1926, according to McCubbin and colleagues (1980:857). "The foundation for family stress research may be traced to Burgess (1926), Angell (1936), Cavan and Ranck (1938), Koos (1949), and Hill's (1949) classic research on war-induced separation and reunion" (McCubbin et al. 1980:855).

"Stressor events" are, according to McCubbin and colleagues (1980), family hardships and events that disrupt the family, such as a wife being hospitalized, loss of income, or loss of a home. The impact of a crisis on a family varies depending on the family's level of resilience. Family resilience is a concept that has been studied by family scholars in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic in the last couple of years. Family scholars who have examined family stress and resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Prime et al. 2020; Eales et al. 2021) have noted that pre-existing factors, such as economic resources and family togetherness, influence family resilience. Cooper (2014:211) stated that how families experience family stress and family security can be challenging for sociologists to understand. "The rich don't always feel rich and secure, and the poor don't always feel poor and insecure" (Cooper 2014:211). The same event can have a profoundly negative impact on one family and a negligible one on another, or even a positive one. While it is often the case that families who are privileged, for example, may say they are happy about the pandemic because they get time off from work, whereas a less privileged family may say that their entire world has ended, it is also possible that these experiences are not perceived as we expect. For example, Tevington (2018) found that upper-middle-class youth are more worried about their futures related to the recession than their low-income counterparts, who were more hopeful. Tevington (2018:212) stated that working-class people blamed their circumstances on their own personal failures rather than the recession, while upper-middle-class youth attributed their struggles to broader structural and economic forces.

According to McCubbin and colleagues (1980:856), "the definition the family makes of the seriousness

of the change(s) influences the family's vulnerability to the crisis." As McCubbin and colleagues (1980:856) observe, Burr (1970) and Hansen (1965) describe "the variation in the family system's ability to recover from the disruptions that result from a stressful event." Hill (1949) describes "family stressors" as events that happen and bring changes in the family. "Family stress," on the other hand, is described as a response to stressors. Hill (1949) and Burr (1973) describe family stress as "residue of tensions generated by a family stressor which remains unmanaged" (McCubbin et al. 1980:857). Family stress, for example, could refer to responses such as family conflict in the face of family stressors like wars and economic downturns, as seen during the 2008 recession. In this study, the COVID-19 pandemic was identified as a family stressor, leading to increased family stress in the form of conflict, for example.

Methods

In this study, I conducted 44 in-depth interviews with 12 families. I conducted ethnographic observations of 4 of those families. This study includes 16 couples (7 grandparent couples and 9 parent couples). All of the participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. To obtain this sample, I began by speaking with individuals involved in a Catholic organization affiliated with a Catholic church in rural upstate New York. They provided me with a lot of helpful information on how to effectively distribute flyers and inform people about my study. They referred to me a few families they knew, and from there, I did a combination of snowball sampling and responding to interest in the flyers. I occasionally attended mass and stood outside with my flyers, handing them to people who approached me with interest. Occasionally, someone would ask to do the interview right after mass or after they had lunch. My personal biography may play a role in this trust because I come from a Catholic family and was familiar with interacting at mass, which gave me an inside understanding of Catholicism. This also made it easier to interact with the church community because I was allowed to stand outside the church to collect my interviews. The fact that the subject of my study pertains to children and family relationships was well received by the church community.

In my sample, none of the grandparents lived with the grandchildren. Some grandchildren were brought to their grandparents' house, while others came to their adult children's house to care for them. At least one grandparent took care of their grandchildren physically, and occasionally, grandparents stated that their primary involvement in their grandchild's care was financial, providing transportation, or hosting playdates with other grandparents, in-laws, and friends. All grandparents and their adult children live in rural upstate New York and have at least 1 family member affiliated with the Roman Catholic Church. This is why this study does not reflect the fact that working-class couples are less likely to be married than middle-class families (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Smock, Manning, and Porter 2005) as neatly. The Roman Catholic faith emphasizes the importance of marriage before childbearing. These families all had at least one child between the ages of 5 and 10. All the participants in my sample identify as white and reside in rural upstate New York. Their parents also reside in a small rural town in upstate New York that I am calling Shelville, New York. Some of the participants work in the closest city to Shelville. This is especially true for middle-class participants who could afford to drive long distances to commute to work. While this

was an inconvenience, they had working cars and high enough pay at their jobs to afford the gas.

These interviews were conducted from August 2022 to November 2023. Interviews were semi-structured and captured both generational perspectives and the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on family roles, caregiving, and adaptation. Separate interview guides were used for adult children and grandparents, ensuring that each generation's experiences were explored in depth while also facilitating comparisons across family members and couples. Adult children were asked about the pandemic's impacts on parenting, employment, and their reliance on grandparents, while grandparent interviews focused on caregiving roles and well-being. Both generations were asked about their relationships, stress, and childcare responsibilities. A full list of interview questions is included in the Appendix.

The couples that were interviewed were interviewed separately. Occasionally, they were in the same house, but not in the same room. This was necessary because during the COVID-19 pandemic, many of these family members worked from home or retired. Most participants were interviewed in their homes; however, occasionally, participants were unable to be interviewed in person and were interviewed via Zoom instead. The IRB (University at Buffalo) approved this project: STUDY00006521.

Data Analysis

Using Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software, I coded the data for emerging themes. My coding method was inductive. A benefit of inductive coding is that it allows the researcher to get a comprehensive understanding of the context of the data and to capture the themes that are important to the participants (Azungah 2018). The data I analyzed consisted of my memos and interview transcripts with 44 participants. After reading the data, I did open coding and generated analytic codes. "Stress about relationship dissolution," for example, is a code that emerged as a theme through inductive analysis. This theme emerged from participants, particularly fathers, responding to a question about the stress that they experience, that they have a fear of divorce, being left by a spouse, or fear of a reduction in marital satisfaction. The code "hope" emerged when participants used the word "hope" when describing how experiences around the COVID-19 pandemic both made them "lose hope" and "have hope." I did not have any interview questions about "hope," but "hope" was a theme that emerged from the participants.

Findings

Many participants in this study thought of the COVID-19 pandemic as a family stressor. These participants described employment, childcare, and family relationships as the primary sources of stress in their families, which they experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. This was expressed through semi-structured in-depth interviews with participants.

Employment and Family

Employment losses were widespread during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is also true for the participants in this study. Many study participants lost their employment, they were forced to quit their job for childcare reasons, they had to work from home, they had to rely on financial help from their parents when they did not feel comfortable asking for help, or in three extreme cases, they had to be

quarantined away from their family to make ends meet. Fears about employment and material security haunt the minds of family members—men were most haunted by these fears.

In response to a question regarding COVID-19's impact on childcare, one father, whom I call Jason, described his experience of having to be far away from his family to make money. He describes how he lives in Shelville and has to commute an hour to the closest city to his town of residence. In the following excerpt, he described a difficult work-family trade-off.

> I am away from my wife and kids most of the time. Not because I choose to be. It would be crazy to commute back and forth from the city to Shelville every day. I would be spending too much money on gas, and it would be a two-hour drive every day! It sucks, though, because my kids feel like strangers to me, and my wife is not happy with me. This has put a strain on our marriage. My wife wants me to get a closer job, but I wouldn't be able to support the family. I went to school to be a software engineer, and the only job I could get with my degree was in the city. [father, 31]

Jason states that his employment has put a strain on his marriage and connection with his kids, and he describes a work-family trade-off decision that is very difficult. Jason wanted a job that utilized the college degree he had earned, wanted to make good money to best support his wife and children, but at a cost to his family relationships. According to Jason, there were no such opportunities around Shelville. Jason was engaging in identity maintenance—he was preserving a positive self-concept when he described himself as a provider who sacrifices time with the family for financial security "for the family." He also told this to his wife—when it came up in conversations during my observations, he said to other family members and friends that his decision was the best thing for the whole family, even though his wife did not agree. She was friendly and accepted it verbally, but inside, she did not. In a related interview exchange about pandemic adjustments to childcare, Taylor described a similar experience:

> My wife is very understanding that I have to live in a different area than her during the week while she stays home with our son. I come back home to be with my family every weekend. That is how it is now, but when quarantine happened, I had to be isolated and did not see my family for weeks on end. It was very hard. I always worried deep down that she would get sick of waiting for me and meet someone else who could be there with her. [father, 36]

Taylor's words indicated that he feels a sense of insecurity about the stability of his marriage. While he said that his wife is very understanding, he also admitted to having a fear that perhaps she would get tired of waiting for him and want to form a relationship with someone she can see every day, wake up next to, and have a more "stable" marriage with. He, like Jason, described a material need to work as a software engineer in a job not available in Shelville. A third father, Calan, shared a similar sentiment.

> My wife has told me that she is unhappy with me having this job. I have asked her about possibly moving away from Shelville and looking into living closer to my job, but she refuses to move because she wants to be near her parents. Right now, her parents' house is walking distance away from our house. She wants this setup so that the kids can see their grandparents every day. I worked hard for this job and don't want to leave it. I wish she would just understand and move. [father, 31]

Calan's reason for his frustration is that his wife does not want to move closer to his job, which he feels he has invested a great deal of effort in. In his case, COVID-19 had a less significant impact on his sentiment. However, when asked how the pandemic altered childcare arrangements, he explained:

> Quarantine was very rough. My two buddies [Jason and Taylor] and I had to quarantine together, so we got an apartment to live in, and now we all stay there during the week and all carpool to go home on weekends. We have known each other since high school, and all went to school together to get our college degrees. We all work at the same place and our wives are all friends. We didn't decide to just stay out here during the week until quarantine happened, and now we just do it because it makes more sense. It's kind of nice to get away and hang with the guys, you know, have drinks and eat chicken wings… [father, 31]

Calan identified what he perceives to be positive effects of the COVID-19 stressor. He pointed out that the pandemic was the cause of the need to live away from the family during the week, but sees it as a break and something that does not, for him, risk fragmenting his family to the same extent as his friends, who both voiced concerns about the state of their marriages and relations with their children. He described this as a convenient solution for work transportation, and that it was nice to have drinks with his friends and be away from his family for a while.

Childcare

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on childcare was huge for parents. Grandparents were heavily relied on for the care of the grandchildren due to changes prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic. During quarantine, grandparents were, for many parents, the only option for childcare with schools closed.

Another way the COVID-19 pandemic affected childcare is that it shook up gender roles and responsibilities in unique ways. In two cases, participants described leaving the workforce entirely, such as Vicky and Kathleen's husband, George, because childcare demands exceeded their capacity to manage both paid labor and parenting. For example, I interviewed a mother who, in response to a question about pandemic-related parenting changes, shared that her husband lost his job and ended up surprising her as a very good stay-at-home dad. It was a side to her husband that she never thought she would unearth. With pride, she said:

> The point when, especially when I had my last child out, my husband lost his job. So, he was in the house. And literally, he helped me to take care of my last child because he wasn't working. So most of the time, he devoted to helping me take care of the kids. For now, he doesn't have a job. So he's mostly in the house. He makes homemade waffles now. He does it all… hahahaha! [mother, 27]

Kathleen was very happy that he made homemade waffles and helped her take care of the kids. With the prevalence of gender role expectations, she expressed surprise that he would devote himself to feminine-coded pursuits such as childcare and making homemade waffles. This family was a family with whom I did ethnographic fieldwork. In their family, neither the mother nor the father had employment. They were funded by Kathleen's father, and her mother was highly involved in the childcare. Together, the three of them (Kathleen, her mother, and her husband) engaged in direct childcare. The money

was given to them by Kathleen's father. On a weekend research visit, Kathleen's father helped George with yard work while the grandparents entertained the children inside. Afterward, George admitted to feeling embarrassed about needing so much assistance but also relieved: "At least the kids get to see their grandparents every day." This illustrated how changing employment roles shifted caregiving and maintenance responsibilities to older generations while also reinforcing family closeness.

In contrast, Kathleen's husband, George, expressed some feelings of guilt for not working. He lost his job because of the COVID-19 pandemic. When I asked him about his stressors related to fatherhood, he talked about how he experienced guilt about unemployment.

> I feel bad that I don't really pull my weight around here. I like being home with Kathleen and the kids, but I feel bad taking money from her dad. I think she likes that I am home all the time, but can't help but feel insecure. [father, 33]

Even though Kathleen is proud of her husband taking direct care of the kids and helping out, it is unsatisfactory to George's self-concept that he is not able to "pull his weight" as a man. He said that living in the small town in rural upstate New York where they reside, "there really isn't much work." He also added he would commute if the money was worth it, given the time it would take. He stated that his goal would be to either find a very high-paying job in the city or maybe even somewhere in Shelville, or to get an online job. Because he only has a community college degree, George said that he does not see how it will get him a job that pays enough to make the commute worthwhile, given that his wife cannot work since she has just had a newborn.

Hope

The COVID-19 stressor put a lot of pressure on the participants in this study. Many of them said they have lost hope, felt demoralized, and occasionally even questioned the existence of God. This is particularly poignant given the religious background of most of the families in my study, in which at least one family member actively participates in a Catholic faith community. Other participants held out hope and engaged in what Hitlin and Elder (2007) refer to as "life course agency." Life course agency, according to Hitlin and Elder (2007). occurs when individuals set goals for themselves and think through how they will make improvements in their lives. This is the "if I just do this, maybe this could happen" thinking. Through the data participants provided in their interviews about their positive thinking and planfulness, I incorporated the life course principle of "agency" into the study.

Meryl, a grandmother who does the majority of childcare for her son's children, described how she has occasionally lost hope because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Her son lost his job, got a DUI, lost his driver's license, and his girlfriend left him; and she adopted most of the childcare responsibilities.

> Sometimes you just, you know, lose hope. It feels like there is no point in trying because another thing is going to happen and make it impossible to get back up. It's like you get bigger ideas about what will happen, and then something just... stops it. [grandmother, 58]

When Meryl said that something just "stops it," she was referring to her son's DUI. He began driving under the influence after he lost his job. Meryl

described how her son felt completely defeated when he was laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

> I am basically raising my grandchildren. Their mother told me that I would be a better person to take care of the kids than she is. I was very involved before with the kids, and she did not feel like she could provide the level of care that I can now that I am retired and have more financial security to offer them. My son is currently staying here, but is looking for a place. He is doing better, but it has been hard since he lost his job and his relationship with his girlfriend ended. [grandmother, 58]

Meryl's son, Mark, described his loss of hope and desire to improve his life in the following excerpt about his account of his DUI, breakup, and newfound resolve to improve his life. This was in response to a question about the effects of the pandemic on how he felt as a parent:

> I screwed up very bad. I got in a lot of trouble from the DUI and was in a very bad place. I tried to make it work with my job and everything, but I really screwed up. I lost my job, and everything kind of went downhill from there. I am trying to get a place to live with my kids so that I can be a better dad. Right now, that isn't really something I can do. [father, 43]

Even though Mark describes his regret for having "screwed up very badly," and expressed a loss of hope, he also described having a desire to get his own place. At best, his orientation toward his current situation and the future is ambivalent—a mixture of hopelessness and hope. Mark lost his job because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and then he got a DUI after he drank a lot. He talked about how he was in a bad place fiscally, and it caused him such stress that he spent more time at the bar the year after the pandemic, and in 2021, he got a DUI.

Similar to Mark, Roland described having a similar loss of hope from being laid off during the COVID-19 pandemic, when asked how the pandemic had affected how he felt as a parent:

> I couldn't believe it… When I got that phone call from my boss that I was losing my job. I somehow knew what would happen when I answered the phone. I didn't tell my wife about it for 4 weeks because I was embarrassed. I was really lucky because my parents and her parents helped us, but it was still embarrassing to have to tell my wife that I got laid off. [father, 30]

Roland expressed his embarrassment about being laid off, despite knowing that many others had faced the same fate during the pandemic. He felt that if he were a more valuable worker, he might not have been chosen for layoff. Roland was engaging in impression management—he did not want his wife to know at first that he had lost his job. Even though he knew many were laid off during the pandemic, he still had that embarrassment, and he wanted to avoid his wife knowing until her finding out could no longer be stopped.

> I thought that maybe they wouldn't lay me off because my boss liked me, and I thought they would never fire me. It must be that they laid a lot of people off. I still take it personally. My parents could afford to help us, but it's embarrassing. [father, 30]

Even though Roland was financially secure, coming from a middle-class family with middle-class parents who could afford to support him and his wife, he still experienced embarrassment for not being

considered "valuable enough" to keep. He described having a lack of hope in the following excerpt:

> I just don't know if I am going to be able to get my wife to believe in me again after being laid off. It's embarrassing! I think she must think I am a loser who isn't capable of being responsible. I just think it's impossible to be seen as responsible again. [father, 30]

Roland described experiencing embarrassment, but also a lack of hope because he said that he thinks "it's impossible to be seen as responsible again." He feels that the respect he feels he has lost is possibly out of reach and thus hopeless.

Rural Location

Living in a rural location was described by participants in the study as a source of stress to their families. Three men in the study who work as software engineers reported difficulties associated with their rural location and transportation to work, as well as having to live away from their wives and children during the week. This is an example of how a rural location can make life more stressful for families. Another example of rural location and family stress is exemplified by Meryl. In response to an interview question about how the pandemic had an impact on childcare for her, Meryl described the following:

> It's hard to find other kids to play with my grandson in Shelville. My grandson changed schools after COVID-19 because my son's DUI caused him to have to move in with me before he finds a new apartment. My grandson doesn't have any friends around here, and it isn't like a suburb where kids just walk from house to house to find other children to play with. [grandmother, 58]

Meryl expressed disappointment in her inability to find other children for her grandson to play with. Rural upstate New York has a lot of areas where there are not a lot of children to play with as it is, but Meryl's son getting the DUI caused a change in location within the same county that further exacerbated this problem because, during periods of the COVID-19 pandemic and online school, the experience of being a "new kid" meant having no one to play with.

> He's so bored, and I wish I could do something about it. He does talk to his old friends on Skype, but it's not the same as having physical contact. It's not the same as playing outside like my son did when he was a kid. [grandmother, 58]

Meryl explained how times have changed and how much more difficult it is for kids to play with each other due to the COVID-19 stressor.

A rural location is also a source of family stress due to the loneliness experienced by parents. This loneliness was especially prevalent for mothers. In response to a question about some challenges she faced in providing childcare, Rachel described her loneliness living in rural upstate New York.

> It's been lonely. I feel, uh, like crap. There isn't things to do around here. I just wish that I could do more than be home with my mom and this baby. I cry a lot because I want to be able to hang out with other people. [mother, 28]

I asked Rachel about how she experiences stress as a parent living in rural upstate New York. She described her experiences of stress related to her loneliness and isolation.

> I am super stressed all the time! I want to be able to hang out with other people and be myself, but I can't

> because I am always stuck at home with this baby. It feels unfair that I see people on social media doing other things, and I am here… with my mom and this baby. It's not my mom's fault, but sometimes I wish she would just not be with me for a day so I could be able to do my thing without her breathing down my neck. I'm stressed because I feel like nothing is going to improve, and I could be like this for the rest of my life. Bored… so bored. [mother, 28]

Rachel described stress related to her sense of loneliness, boredom, and isolation. Interestingly, she described a scenario in which she feels lonely in the presence of another person. She could, for example, feel less lonely if she had a day without her mother around her. She said informally (which I wrote down in my memo) that she feels like she cannot communicate with her friends on social media without her mother reading her messages and commenting on everything she does. In some cases, the help of grandparents comes at a cost to a person's privacy and sense of empowerment.

The feelings of loneliness Rachel described about having children in rural upstate New York were not unique to her. Another mother, Clara, also spoke about her loneliness when asked how job loss and rural location affected her role as a mother.

> Ever since I lost my job, my husband has been the only one working. I am not feeling very good at home alone. I think I feel lonely. [mother, 34]

Clara lost her job because of the COVID-19 pandemic. She did not like being alone at home. The theme of loneliness was prevalent in the sample. The loneliness of motherhood and grandmotherhood was described by women in the sample. Men described isolation from their families, such as in cases where they stayed away from their families for work. The deep sense of isolation, characterized by feeling "alone," was described only by the women in the sample, including both mothers and grandmothers. This experience was characterized by feeling "grounded" with young kids and having to stay home to watch them, especially when they were young. According to Clara:

> There's something lonely about being at home with the baby, and they always need you there to keep them entertained… and the coughing and the crying… it can be lonely to have to make sure everything is good and having to look levelheaded in their eyes… [mother, 34]

What Clara described was emotion work (Hochschild 2012). Clara spoke to me about the stress of needing to seem levelheaded in the eyes of her child and how difficult it can be to act happy when things are not going well.

> I spend most of my time crying when they are sleeping because it's the only time I feel like I can have a break, and I just think about how I had friends and now I don't. I don't have friends because I have to be there at all times and the coughing and the crying… [mother, 34]

Clara's father-in-law, Philip (64), talked about how he helps out financially, but not with childcare. He said, "I help my son, James [37], with money, but I don't do the 'coughing thing.'" What he meant by the "coughing thing" was COVID-19. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he kept physical distance from the family to avoid exposure to COVID-19 because he was worried about his physical health problems, which were mostly high blood pressure, which made him vulnerable. Both of their kids (3 and 5

years old) got COVID-19 in 2021 and, according to James, it was "unimaginably bad."

> Oh gosh, the coughing… poor Clara had to take care of them by herself while they were so sick… we all got sick in the whole family. I went to work anyways because I had to, but the kids were so sick... especially our youngest son. He was so sick, and it was upsetting to watch. Looking at his little face while he coughed made me want to cry. He has a good mama. She took good care of him. [father, 37]

Clara described her husband, James, as her rock.

> He's so nice and good to me. He's my rock. He works hard for us. I just don't like the being alone part. His dad is good, too. I am lucky to have a good family. I just can't help that sometimes the coughing… it's just a lot to deal with when I am falling apart. I can't exactly make friends in Shelville to spend time with me for hanging out together with kids. [mother, 34]

Isolation was a common theme among mothers in the sample. Of the 12 mothers interviewed, 9 described feeling socially isolated or lonely because of being home with young children in a rural setting. These feelings were often linked to limited social outlets, lack of peers nearby, and reliance on extended family rather than broader friendship networks. For example, Rachel and Clara both expressed boredom and loneliness, even when they had family support, because they lacked same-age peers or opportunities for independent social activity. This pattern was less prevalent among grandmothers, with only three of the 13 grandmothers describing isolation, typically when childcare responsibilities limited their social lives. This suggests that mothers experienced isolation more acutely than grandmothers, reflecting both life stage and the intensity of daily childcare work in rural places.

Gender Roles

Stress during the pandemic manifested in gendered ways, shaped by both longstanding expectations and the unique pressures of caregiving, isolation, and economic instability. The following section explores how mothers, fathers, and grandparents experienced and talked about the stress they experienced through the lens of their gender roles. Two families specifically described intergenerational friction rooted in these unequal expectations: in one case, a grandmother resented the lack of support from her husband and adult children, while in another, a maternal grandmother judged her son-in-law's domestic role as inadequate.

Men in the study emphasized the importance of earning money, often at the expense of being physically present with their children. Women, on the other hand, emphasized the importance of being physically around their children at the expense of earning money outside the home. Keep in mind that the sample consists of at least one family member per family who is an active member of a Catholic faith community. Most of the participants in the sample identify as Roman Catholics, and it is at least possible that they may have more "traditional" gender role expectations than is typical in American society.

Rachel, a middle-class mother I interviewed and conducted a case study with, described how stressful she felt about her responsibilities as a parent and the ambivalence she occasionally felt about the parental role.

> As a parent, you occasionally feel the stress for responsibility, and sometimes I wish I wasn't a parent. Not really, but occasionally, I think that. I wish I could just be

> me. Not a parent, no husband, nothing, just me, go to work, come back, lock the door, and sleep. My dad said God has a different plan for me. When I got pregnant with my first baby, my father made me keep it and told me to marry the dad. I was 19 then. The baby got me closer to God, but the stress for the responsibility of it all can be too much. [mother, 28]

Rachel described her occasional feelings of not wanting to take the responsibility of being a mother and wife. She mentioned at other times during my ethnographic observation that she sees her peers who are the same age as her having fun with their friends and attending college, and she feels trapped in a life she did not necessarily choose for herself. Her family is comprised of very observant Catholics, and does not believe in abortion or childbearing outside of marriage. She has made peace with her life and her motherhood role externally, but internally, she struggles with this responsibility and is haunted by thoughts of other possibilities. When asked how the COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on childcare for her, Rachel reflected:

> When I think about my life, I think about how COVID-19 changed things for me. I thought I could spend time with my friends and be a parent, but living where I do, there aren't many ways for me to hang out with other mothers my age for playdates… I am kind of stuck here, which really felt like crap during the quarantine. I got so tired of wearing masks at the store and not being able to hang out with friends. It was very… lonely. I had my husband and my parents, but I had to see things like, on Facebook, pictures of my friends having fun while I was stuck with my mom at the house with a baby. [mother, 28]

Rachel, who was pressured by her father, Geoff, to have the baby when an unplanned pregnancy occurred, said she did so because of her family's religious beliefs. However, the decision was also overseen by her father, who wanted her to keep the baby. His reasoning was the family's religious beliefs. Rachel was not a minor when she got pregnant. She was 19 years old. Rachel did not want to keep the baby, but was convinced to do so by her father, who told her that it would make her closer to God. Yet, Rachel described how she often wishes she did not have to be a mother. In Rachel's situation, even though she expressed a closeness to God after having the baby, she still feels like she is missing out and, on occasion, wishes she did not have to be a mother or a wife.

Rachel's father was initially upset when Rachel got pregnant because she was having sex before marriage, but he described how he forgave her and felt blessed by the birth of the grandchild, who is now elementary school-aged. He described how blessed he felt for the opportunity to have a grandchild when he is young enough to spend time with him. His reflections emerged in response to a question about how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted how he felt as a grandparent.

> When her mother told me she was pregnant, I was very angry. But once the idea settled into my head, and she agreed to marry the father, I learned how to forgive her. I read scripture and was talked into it by her mother who was supportive of her and her decision to accept responsibility. When he was born, all of those negative feelings went away. He was perfect! And, I got to spend time with him when I was young enough to play and not be too old to play baseball with him. Rachel is a very good mother. I couldn't be more proud of her. [grandfather, 49]

Geoff described how proud he was of Rachel and how his negative sentiment about her out-of-wedlock

pregnancy disappeared after the baby boy was born. This baby was, in his mind, perfect and a gift from God. Geoff described the role Rachel's mother played in convincing him to forgive Rachel for getting pregnant before marriage. In this rural, Roman Catholic community, everyone knows everyone else. Geoff described thinking about the "stress" of people believing he is a bad father because his daughter had a baby before she was married. He described experiencing "stress" about future "embarrassment." Childcare is a community endeavor in Shelville. Many of the parents know each other and attend church community events where the children participate. Geoff, although happy to be a grandfather, felt he fell short as a man in the face of his community, which reads scripture that emphasizes the role of fathers as examples, leaders, and patriarchs responsible for the entire family.

Valery, a middle-class grandmother, expressed frustration with how much she was expected to take care of her grandchildren. She pointed out that her adult children are not grateful for what she does and that her husband does not have to do the childcare she does. This emerged after she was asked to describe a typical day with her grandchildren.

> I clean, I cook, I take care of the grandkids, I take care of the kids, and my husband doesn't do anything. My daughter works from home, and she can't be bothered to take care of her kids while working from home. If I took one day off, I think the world would implode, and I feel like no one appreciates my work. [grandmother, 45]

Valery said she was stressed because she had to do all the household work and felt unappreciated for the work she did. This sentiment of feeling underappreciated was similarly expressed by other grandmothers and mothers in this sample.

Calan's wife, Julie, whose husband lived away from his family for work (who described it as a chance to catch up with his "buddies" and eat chicken wings), shared her feelings about her gender role responsibilities.

> I never thought that my life would be like this! I always knew I would do more work around the house, and I always knew I would do the cooking and cleaning and… you know, change the diapers and make sure everyone is taken care of… I always thought that my husband would live with me! I always worry that he is out… meeting other women. Even though I trust him… It still stresses me out! [mother, 29]

Julie described her stress about relationship dissolution associated with her husband living near his workplace during the workweek, a situation he described as necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though she said she trusted him, she also expressed fear that he might meet another woman and potentially either leave the relationship or fall in love with someone else. I asked her to elaborate about this.

> My father cheated on my mother… I always worry about that… like, what if he cheated on me or fell in love with someone else? I wouldn't even be able to know what he is doing. It kind of makes me feel stressed when he doesn't text me right away. I just get stressed out and feel out of control. I am comforted by my mother being around me, though. On one hand, she makes me feel more stressed by telling me about how dad cheated on her, but she also makes me feel less alone. I know it isn't rational, though… I know deep down that he won't cheat. [mother, 29]

Julie had concerns about being cheated on by her husband while he is away or the possibility of him "falling in love with someone else." Her relationship with her mother, the grandmother of her children, who helps her, is described as a great comfort but, at times,

a source of stress, as it hints at what her husband could be doing when he was away from home. Julie's mother did not describe the circumstances of her husband's cheating when I interviewed her, instead describing her relationship with her husband as "smooth sailing." Julie's husband, Calan, voiced similar concerns in terms of worrying about possible cheating. When interviewed, he said he wanted Julie to move closer to his job rather than stay in Shelville because he was worried she might leave him for someone else while he was away. Both spouses voiced concerns about fidelity or being replaced by someone else. They both expressed concerns about staying together in their marriage and placed their concerns about possible risks to their relationships on the other person, not on themselves. Neither of them said that they entertained other options or thought about cheating, but worried that the other would cheat or "fall in love with someone else." In Calan's narrative, if this happened, it would be due to a personal sacrifice that he made by prioritizing keeping dinner on the table over being home with his family every day. Both Calan and Julie said they used the time apart to engage in homosocial friendships—Julie described her mother as her "very best friend," and Calan said he enjoyed having chicken wings with his "buddies." The stress of not being able to witness what their partner does during this time apart, according to both Calan and Julie, creates an environment where they may let their minds run away with them, stressing about what their partner might be doing when they cannot watch them for days.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic functioned as a significant stressor for rural families, generating a range of stress responses among grandparents and their adult children. Some of them include stress about relationship dissolution, employment, family instability, their children's outcomes, the potential for things not improving, and the loss of hope. The stressors have in common that they are associated with unknowable future outcomes. The COVID-19 stressor has had a harmful effect on the hope of the families in this study. There were some examples of positive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on family relationships, but its effects were mostly perceived negatively and associated with stress experienced at the family and individual levels. Working-class participants in my study blamed their misfortunes on themselves, even though those misfortunes resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic. Their "identity narratives" (Destin and Debrosse 2017) were characterized by self-blame, which is consistent with Tevington's (2018) finding that many working-class people blame themselves for their adverse experiences that are structural in nature, such as a recession or, in this case, a pandemic. Rural grandparents and their adult children may be less exposed to social others who could tell them that the bad things that happen to them are part of a large, societally experienced stressor. The sample is highly religious (Roman Catholic), and within that religion, there is a focus on God deciding what happens and on the importance of living life humbly, which could play a role in the self-blame expressed by the participants in the study.

There is a gender component to how stress manifested for my sample. The men in my sample were very likely to blame themselves for things like family separation and employment problems that were clearly caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. They internalized blame for the decisions they felt they had to make about work and family. This theme of self-blame was less prevalent among middle-class men. When the men in my sample described stress, they described personal work-related stress, but they did not, in a single instance, describe the stress that may have been experienced by their partners, parents,

or children. Many of the men described their wives and partners as either happy to do the childcare or as "saints" who do so much for the family, but they did not describe it as "stressful" for them, even when the women said they were stressed by all of those responsibilities. There is a disconnect between the narrative some of the men have versus the realities expressed by the women in the sample.

The women in the study did not blame themselves for the loss of jobs, but did blame themselves for other misfortunes, such as getting pregnant and having a baby, and not being able to keep a husband from going to work far away to live. They were more likely to describe isolation and loneliness as their family stressors, describing "loneliness" as a personal experience that causes personal stress and as a stressor experienced at the family level. This was expressed as feeling "stressed" about having a lack of community. Other mothers described feeling stressed by the personal isolation they experienced while doing childcare and feeling contained and alone when their husbands were either at work for the day or for the entire week. Childcare stress, for example, was not described by the fathers and grandfathers in the study. In sharp contrast, all of the women in this study described some degree of stress related to childcare and children. This was equally expressed by mothers and grandmothers. Fathers often described their work as personally stressful, either because the jobs themselves were stressful (software engineers were common in my sample) or because time away from their partners and children made them feel their family was "getting weak." Mothers, fathers, grandmothers, and grandfathers all voiced concerns about the outcomes of the children—their access to quality education, their reading scriptures and becoming active members of the Roman Catholic church they are all associated with, and their development down the "right path," which was described by many of the parents and grandparents, both men and women, as a path in which their children "know right from wrong" and are "good" and not "bad." Much of this, for them, meant valuing their families and reading and following the church's teachings. Both men and women who were away from each other described some degree of stress associated with potential relationship dissolution. This left them unable to see what the other was doing during the time apart, but also rendered them unable to perform their idealized family roles.

Rural families have unique challenges that were exacerbated by the COVID-19 stressor. This study contributes to our understanding of how large-scale events such as a global pandemic can have a negative effect on families and their everyday lives, their relationships, the way that they care for children, their hope, and how they see themselves as individuals.

Appendix

Interview Protocols

SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE (ADULT CHILDREN)
How often do your parents see their grandchildren?
Where did you grow up?
Where do you live now?
What is your educational background?

What do you do for a living?
Where do your parents live?
What is the education level of your parents?
What do (did) your parents do for a living?
Compare the standard of living of your parents when you were growing up to your current standard of living—is it about the same? More comfortable? Less comfortable?

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR ADULT CHILDREN
Who do you consider to be your family?
How would you describe the level of involvement of your parents with your children?
B. How does this compare with your own?
How would you describe your parenting style?
B. How would you compare your parenting style with your parents'?
What do you think makes someone a "good" childcare giver?
What do you think makes someone a "bad" childcare giver?
How would you describe your relationships with your parents? Tell me about a time you disagreed with them.
How would you describe your relationships with your children?
Walk me through a typical day with your children.
Tell me about how the place you live affects your childcare.
B. In what ways is it beneficial?
C. In what ways is it not beneficial?
Tell me what it is like taking care of the kid(s).
B. What do you enjoy?
C. What is hard?
What are some challenges you face in providing care to your kids?
B. How does caring for children make you feel?
Has COVID-19 had an impact on childcare for you?
B. Has COVID-19 impacted how you feel as a parent?
(You were telling me before) that your parents help you with childcare. What do your parents do for your children?
Does anyone else besides you and your parent(s) help with childcare?
B. Who?
C. In what ways do they help with your children?
Have you ever disagreed with your parents about something to do with your children's care? What happened?
Are there any parts to raising and caring for children that you think should be done by (mothers, fathers, grandparents, others)?

SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE (GRANDPARENTS)
How often do you see your grandchildren?
Where do you live?
What is your educational background?
What do you (did you) do for a living?
Where did your children grow up?
Where do your children live now?
What is your children's education level?
What do your children do for a living?
Compare your adult child's current standard of living to what they were used to growing up—is it about the same? More comfortable? Less comfortable?

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR GRANDPARENTS
Who do you consider to be your family?
How would you describe your level of involvement with your grandchildren?
B. How does this compare with your children when they were little?

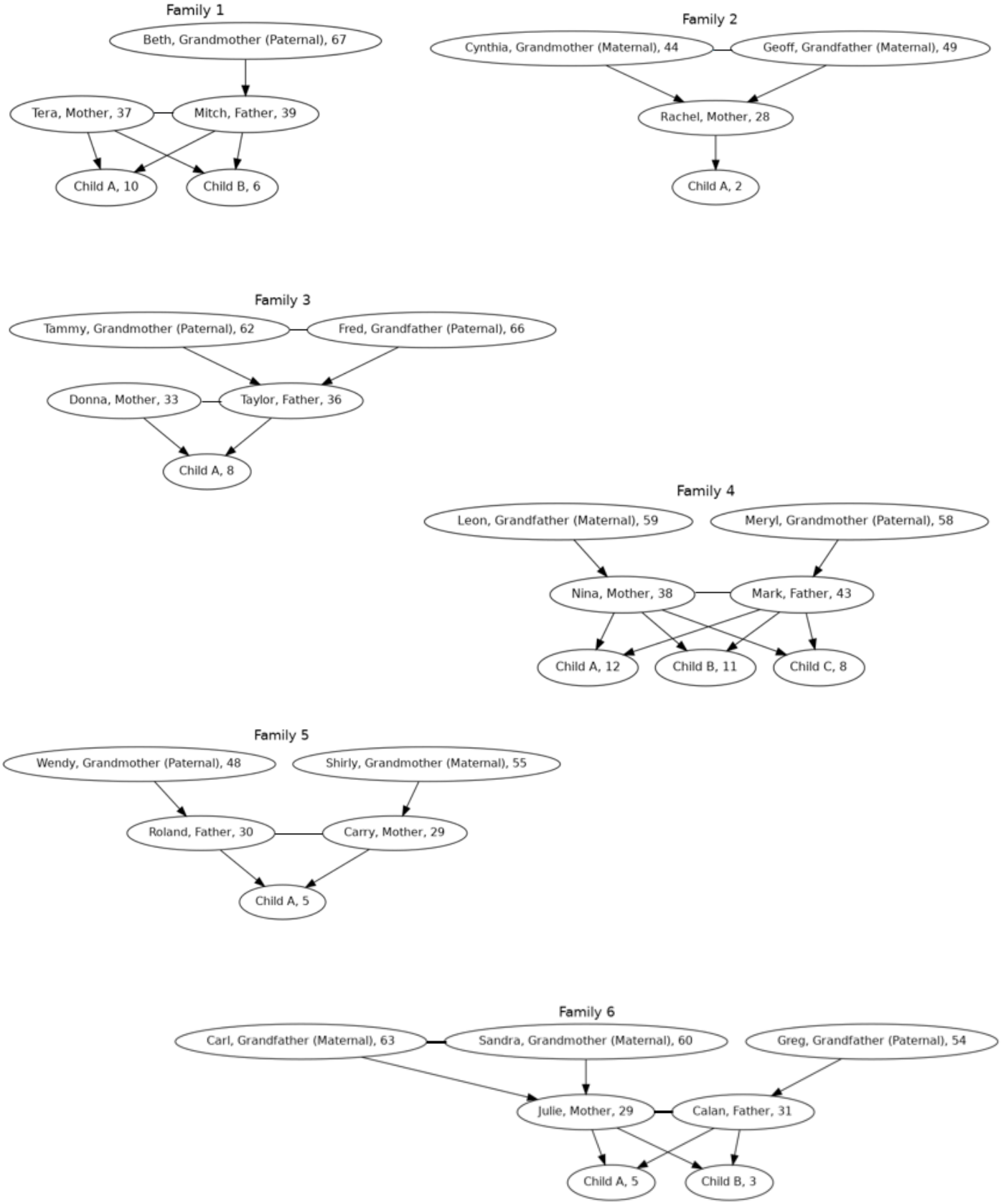
How would you describe your grandparenting style?
B. How would you compare your grandparenting style with your children's parenting style?
What do you think makes someone a "good" childcare giver?
What do you think makes someone a "bad" childcare giver?
How would you describe your relationships with your children?
How would you describe your relationships with your grandchildren?
Walk me through a typical day with your grandchildren.
(You were telling me before) that you help with your grandchildren. How do you help your grandchildren?
Tell me about how the place you live affects your childcare.
    B. In what ways is it beneficial?
    C. In what ways is it not beneficial?
Tell me what it is like taking care of the kid(s).
    B. What do you enjoy?
    C. What is hard?
Does your role as a childcare provider affect your well-being?
    B. Physical
    C. Mental
Has COVID-19 had an impact on childcare for you?
    B. Has COVID-19 impacted how you feel as a grandparent?
Does anyone else besides you care for your grandchildren?
    B. Who?
    C. In what ways do they help with your grandchildren?
Have you ever disagreed with your children about something to do with your grandchildren's care? What happened?
Are there any parts to raising and caring for children that you think should be done by (mothers, fathers, grandparents, others)?

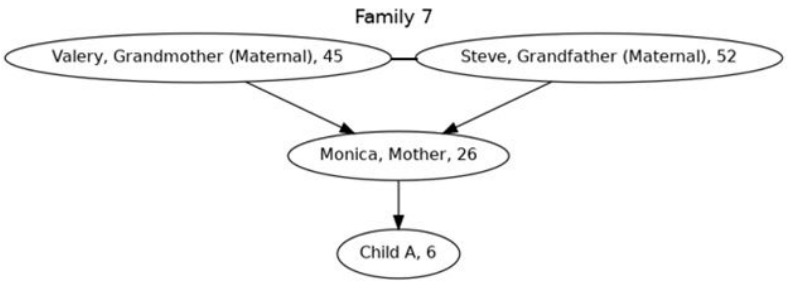
Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

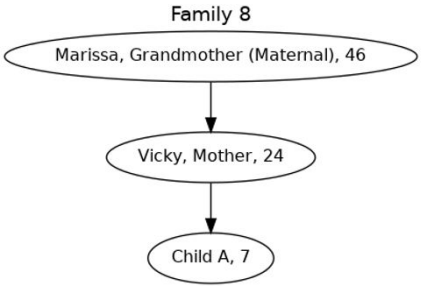
Respondent Characteristics	Number Interviewed
Total Number Interviewed	**44**
Parents	20
Grandparents	24
Marital Status	
Married	24
Unmarried	20
Race	
White	44
Social Class	
Working Class	26
Middle Class	18
Religion	
Catholic	28
Non-Religious	16

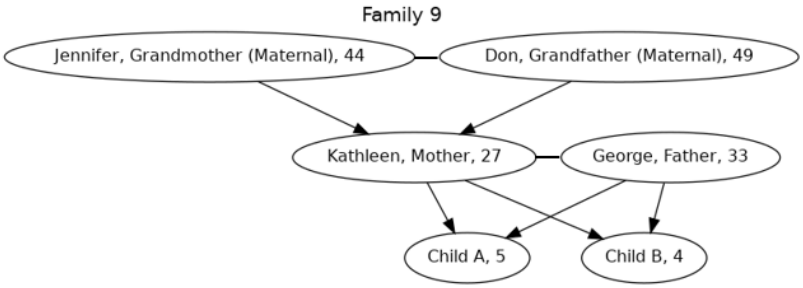
Note: One father depicted in the family trees declined to be interviewed; all other listed parents participated in interviews.
Source: Self-elaboration.

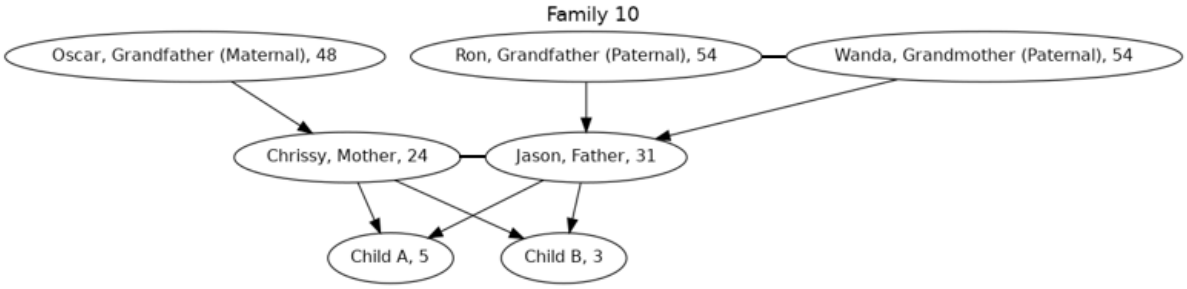
Figure 1. Family Trees

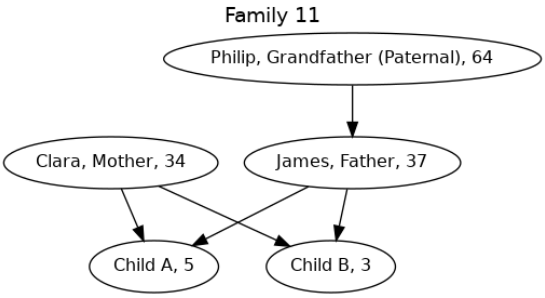


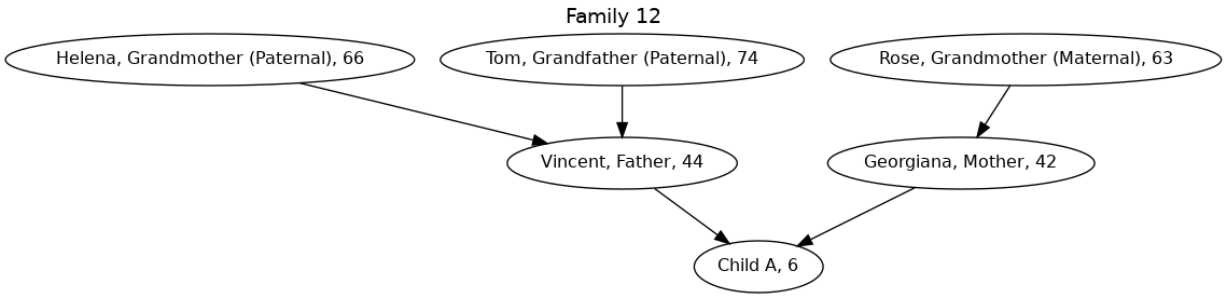












Source: Self-elaboration.

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