

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: FROM OVERSHARING TO SHARENTING:
HOW EXPERTS GOVERN PARENTS AND
THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Priya Kumar, (Doctor of Philosophy), 2021

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A newborn swaddled in a parent's arms. A kindergartner posing on the first day of school. Such images, commonly found in family photo collections, now regularly appear on social media. At the same time, public discourse asks if—or sometimes asserts that—posting images online might put children's privacy, dignity, and autonomy at risk. Prior research has documented the pressure, scrutiny, and judgment that parents, especially mothers, endure. It seems that parents' use of social media is yet another cause for concern. How did this happen? This dissertation examines how power, manifesting as expertise, works through three fields of discourse to govern parents' social media conduct. Grounding this project in post-structuralist epistemology, I study this question using the analytical technique of governmentality, which is a means of tracing how authorities intervene in the lives of individuals. First, I illustrate how a specific site of social media expertise, the once-popular blog STFU, Parents, constructs the problem of "oversharing" as a form of inappropriate social media use. Second, I explain, how news media expertise constructs the problem of "sharenting," a portmanteau of the words "share" and "parenting," as a

form of risk to children. Third, I discern how academic expertise obliges parents to govern their own social media conduct by appealing to their subjectivity. In each field of discourse, I observe how expertise frames parents' social media conduct as a matter of individual responsibility, even though much of what happens to information online lies outside individual control. I use this analysis to suggest future directions for research on social media and privacy that goes beyond the gendered public/private boundary and engages with the world as a site of entangled relations rather than individual entities.

Key words: parents, children, social media, privacy, governmentality, datafication, digital identity

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PARENTS AND THEIR SOCIAL MEDIA USE

by

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Preface

The seed of this dissertation project was sown on an otherwise uneventful afternoon in March 2013. I mindlessly signed into Facebook to take a break from master’s coursework and saw a post from a college friend with whom I’d lost touch after graduation. Two images—a photo of my friend and her husband beaming and holding a sign that said, “We’re pregnant” and an annotated sonogram announcing the due date—appeared alongside text announcing that after four years of struggling to conceive, they were expecting a child that September.

My friend’s pregnancy announcement was one of several I saw on Facebook that year. With each passing ultrasound image, I marveled that these (future) children “existed” on Facebook before they existed as materially distinct individuals in the world. It struck me that, contrary to my own experience of social media, the coming generation of children will inherit digital identities that may predate their birth. They won’t decide whether they want to exist on Facebook; their parents may make that decision years before these children can even sign up for their own profiles. I, as part of one of the earliest college cohorts to obtain a Facebook account, have spent my entire adult life being told to watch what I posted online (P. Kumar, 2016a). That approach is not going to work for the next generation because they have no control over what is posted about their early life.

“How are parents thinking about this?” I wondered. That sparked a project to interview new mothers about how they decided to post baby pictures online (P. Kumar, 2014; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). The women I talked to were selective in what they posted, and while most valued the ease with which they could share their experiences of motherhood with friends and

family through social media, they also grappled with how their decisions affected their children's privacy. My participants were not the only ones connecting parents' social media posts to children's privacy. Journalists and academics invoke privacy, as well as children's rights to self-determination, as reasons why parents should exercise caution when posting pictures of their children online, or even avoid posting entirely (Geddes, 2014; Minkus et al., 2015; Steinberg, 2017; Webb, 2013).

As a privacy researcher, I expected my dissertation research to examine how parents' posting implicated children's privacy and offer insights into how those privacy concerns could be addressed. But whenever I read a news article or academic paper on the topic, I felt an undertone of judgment from the text—an implication (or sometimes outright accusation) that parents were doing something wrong by posting about their children online. Given the thoughtful responses I heard from the women I interviewed, I found such judgment unfair. The articles used words like “oversharing” and “sharenting” to describe what parents were doing, but I sensed that these words were doing more than neutrally describe or refer to parents' actions. I learned that an entire research approach, that of discourse analysis, studies how language shapes the world, and that critical social sciences examine how language perpetuates or even helps construct oppressive systems like racism, sexism, and ableism. So, my dissertation research shifted from a study of oversharing and sharenting—as something parents do—to one of “oversharing” and “sharenting”—as discursive formations that enable experts to judge what parents do.

I approach this project from an interdisciplinary perspective. I primarily draw on literature from communication/media studies and human-computer interaction/social computing,

though I also incorporate an eclectic mix of scholarship from internet studies, cultural studies, science and technology studies, surveillance studies, and law. My academic background lies in journalism and information studies, and I am currently embedded in an information school. This means that I not only situate my research at the intersection of people, technology, and information (as the iSchool mantra goes), but also that I take seriously (and derive much joy from) the craft of writing. While this document is academic in nature, it also tells a story about my research. And because doctoral research is as much a personal experience of becoming as it is an intellectual journey (Barnacle, 2005), I hope you, the reader, will appreciate the personal anecdotes that contextualizes how this project has come to be.

Dedication

To the late Christin Occhipinti-Benda, who inspired this work, and to Michael Cutulle, who sustained me through it.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Governing Parents' Social Media Use

1.1. The “Problem” of Parents and Social Media Use

“The Problem with ‘Sharenting,’” headlines an op-ed published June 2019 as part of the *New York Times*’s Privacy Project. The author, NPR education reporter Anya Kamenetz (2019), notes that questions about children and digital technology tend to focus on screen time. She argues that the truer concern is adults and the way their decisions “place children’s privacy at great risk” (para. 3). She describes how the proliferation of software, devices, and apps in schools opens children up to surveillance from teachers, parents, and companies like Google (e.g., P. C. Kumar, Vitak, et al., 2019). She expresses concern that surveillance activities, like monitoring children’s online activities and tracking children once they receive their own smartphones, are considered responsible parenting (e.g., L. Stark & Levy, 2018).

Kamenetz then turns to sharenting, a portmanteau of the words “share” and “parenting” that refers to parents posting pictures of their children on social media. She argues that posting about children online gratifies parents and attracts more clicks to social media platforms. She says it unnecessarily puts children’s life stories out for “college admissions officers and future employers, friends and romantic prospects” to see (para 12), makes information available for data brokers to sell to advertisers or for pedophiles to take advantage of, and encourages the commodification of childhood. Parents are now “shoving cameras in children’s faces, using up their free time, killing spontaneity, warping the everyday rituals of childhood into long working shoots” trying to turn their child into the next YouTube moneymaker (para 15).

These worries routinely appear in news articles about parents' social media use. "Does sharing photos of your children on Facebook put them at risk?" asks *The Guardian* (Geddes, 2014). "Do parents invade children's privacy when they post photos online?" wonders an NPR headline (Haelle, 2016). "Should you post pictures of your kids online?" inquires WNYC's "Note to Self" podcast (Zomorodi, 2015). If so, "how much should you share about your kids online?" asks Recode's "Reset" podcast (Duhaim-Ross, n.d.). Perhaps nothing, as one technology commentator stridently argues in a much-discussed article titled, "We post nothing about our daughter online" (Webb, 2013).

Discussions about whether or how much parents should post about their children evoke broader concerns of "oversharing," or the idea that people post "excessive or inappropriate" information on social media (Hoffmann, 2009, p. 1). The journalist credited with coining the term "sharenting," (which he wrote as "oversharenting") stated in an op-ed that "parents embrace social media, often too much" (Leckhart, 2012, p. para 8). Questions about how parents decide what to post motivated me to interview new mothers about their posting habits (P. Kumar, 2014; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). But after studying this topic for eight years, I find questions like those posed by news headlines misplaced. They treat social media use as an individual decision and imply that parents who post about their children are doing something wrong.

Consider another discussion of parents' social media use, this time in an episode of the technology and culture podcast "Note to Self." Host and journalist Manoush Zomorodi and her two guests spend 22 minutes discussing a question from a listener who wondered, "if it's right of me to just blindly post pic after pic of my 3-year-old's entire life all over social media"

(Zomorodi, 2015). Zomorodi does not post pictures of her children online because she feels “a little weird putting them out there” and believes it could be perceived as showing off her family. Hillary Frank, host of the parenting podcast “The Longest Shortest Time,” does not post pictures that show her daughter’s face because her daughter “did not choose” to have her life shared widely with others. Jen Poyant, executive producer of “Note to Self,” says she actively posts pictures of her son on Instagram and Facebook to share her life honestly with family and friends. She consciously decided to be a single mother, and sharing pictures online is her way to show that she and her child “are developing a lovely relationship together” (Zomorodi, 2015).

Although Zomorodi remarks that she and Frank are probably “outliers,” the episode mostly discusses parents who minimize posting pictures of their children online. Frank says she hears a tinge of defensiveness in Poyant’s explanations about posting, to which Poyant agrees:

Yeah, it does [feel like I’m posting pictures from a defensive stance]. I don’t know if I need to be defensive. I don’t think I do...I don’t necessarily feel like I should hide the part of my life that I am so deeply proud of and deeply connected to...I’m not doing anything wrong. I’m posting a picture of my kid wearing funny sunglasses on the way to school...I think there’s this weird division between online, the virtual world, and the real world. And for me, they’re both the same. They’re both a reflection of my real life. (Zomorodi, 2015)

If a mother finds posting a cute picture of her son on Instagram an expression of her lived experience, why is that a problem? Indeed, one needs to look no further than the proverbial album on a closet shelf or the shoebox full of snapshots to know that taking and displaying family photos is nothing new. What *has* changed in recent decades is the *way* people connect over photographs. Rather than send photos through the postal mail or flip through an album

(though these practices are far from extinct), the most common way to show photographs nowadays is by posting them on social media (Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011).

Of course, a Facebook profile differs from a physical photo album. Though they are both embedded in family memory practices, their affordances and the context in which people interact with them produce vastly different effects (Holloway & Green, 2017). So yes, posting pictures of children online might pose risks. (But also, doing any activity poses some risk.) And yes, posting pictures of children online raises questions about privacy. (But also, almost any form of social interaction can implicate privacy.) I do not mean to dismiss these concerns. Rather, I want to understand how they became significant enough to warrant a headline like “The Problem of Sharenting” in one of the most prominent American newspapers.¹

The question that motivates this dissertation is how has parents’ social media conduct coalesced into a problem? Specifically, what political logics, modes of thought, and techniques for regulating conduct have linked up to turn the “problem” of social media into a concept that makes sense? To study this question, I turn to governmentality, an analytical practice for tracing how power works through authorities to intervene in the lives of individuals (Miller & Rose, 2008). I use governmentality to examine how authorities within three discursive fields—social media, news media, and academia—problematize parents’ social media conduct. Discursive fields encompasses distinct ways of “giving meaning to the world and of organizing social

¹ I began developing this argument in an op-ed for *The Conversation* (republished in *Fast Company* and elsewhere), complete with a dramatic headline of my own: “The real problem with posting about your kids online” (P. C. Kumar, 2019a). I know, it’s a bit clickbait-y. But my editor insisted.

institutions and processes” (Weedon, 1997, p. 34). Studying them offers a means to “understand the relationship between language, social institutions, subjectivity, and power” (ibid).

The fields I study embody distinct forms of expertise. Over the 20th century, scientific researchers established child development as a distinct field of study, legitimating academia as a source of child-rearing knowledge. Child-rearing experts such as Dr. Spock harnessed mass media to broadcast this expert knowledge, and parenting itself became a common topic of media coverage (Grant, 1998; Hulbert, 2003; A. R. Simpson, 1997). Parents now also turn to social media for parenting information and advice (Duggan et al., 2015; Lupton et al., 2016). My analysis shows how expertise harnesses different techniques within each discursive field to problematize parents’ social media conduct. In the next section, I offer a brief overview of governmentality, the analytical framework I use to study the three discursive fields. I then identify my research questions and conclude the chapter with an overview of the dissertation.

1.2. The Analytical Practice of Governmentality

Governmentality, a portmanteau of the words “government” and “mentality,” has roots in the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault but has expanded into a method of analysis across the critical social sciences (Miller & Rose, 2008; N. Rose et al., 2006). Chapters 2 and 3 of this dissertation explain governmentality in detail; here I provide a brief sketch to contextualize the dissertation’s research questions.

Governmentality’s epistemological foundation rests in post-structuralism, which rejects the idea that meaning is fixed and that complete knowledge or truth can be attained (Belsey,

2006; Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997). Research in the post-structuralist paradigm explores how discourse, which includes language and other symbolic forms such as gestures, produces meaning based on the context in which it occurs (Belsey, 2006; Weedon, 1997). In post-structuralism, questions about *why* something happens are less important than *how* something happens, because “why” questions imply a level of causality (i.e., x happened because of y) that post-structuralism resists (Bové, 1990).

Governmentality examines how power works through authorities to intervene in the lives of individuals. Foucault observed that as Western political traditions shifted from monarchy to liberalism, authorities justified their positions not by divine right or natural order, but by claiming to serve the interests of the people they governed. State leaders serve their citizens, and heads of households serve their family. Authorities can exert direct control over people through mechanisms like the law and indirect control through mechanisms like norms. The latter operate indirectly by distinguishing normal from abnormal behavior and guiding people to act in certain ways without directly punishing them for not doing so (Dean, 2010; Foucault, 2007; Miller & Rose, 2008). It is important to note that authorities refer not simply to individuals but also entities and institutions spanning “economic, legal, spiritual, medical, [and] technical” realms (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 55).

Government operates by rendering certain ways of acting problematic and then intervening when such actions occur. For instance, when homosexuality is considered deviant, rather than different, authorities regard people who engage in same-sex sexual relations as behaving problematically. They may then intervene in those people’s lives in various ways: by

incarcerating them (rendering homosexuality a crime), trying to cure them (rendering homosexuality a disease), or ostracizing them (rendering homosexuality a stigma). Each intervention constructs the “problem” of homosexuality differently, and in the process, produces different subject positions. The carceral avenue suggests that homosexuality is a danger that requires protecting against and positions the person in question as a criminal. The therapeutic avenue suggests that homosexuality is a pathology that requires treatment and positions the person as a patient. The social exclusion avenue suggests that homosexuality is undesirable and positions the person as an outcast. Each intervention also draws on distinct discursive fields—legal, medical, and sociological, respectively.

As a method of analysis, governmentality entails tracing the processes through which authorities working within and across different discursive fields constitute subjectivity, problematize certain ways of being, and intervene in people’s lives (Miller & Rose, 2008). This is not a centralized, instrumented process—it occurs through loose assemblages of actors, institutions, and spaces, all with competing interests. Interventions never work as planned; they introduce new problems and are taken up in unexpected ways. As feminist technoscience philosopher Karen Barad (2007) notes, the world always kicks back. But tracing this process offers the opportunity to question whether this is the world we want, and, if not, determine how to change it for the better.

1.3. Research Questions

Parents² regularly communicate with others using social media (Auxier et al., 2020; Duggan et al., 2015; Lupton et al., 2016), and employ digital technologies to track, monitor, and share information about children (and childbearing) (Barassi, 2017; Leaver, 2017; Lupton & Williamson, 2017; Mascheroni & Holloway, 2019). Indeed, using smart devices to watch children is increasingly regarded as the “right” way to provide care (L. Stark & Levy, 2018) and displaying children on social media as the way to present oneself as a “good” parent (Lazard et al., 2019). The act of documenting family life is nothing new (Chalfen, 1987; Humphreys, 2018; G. Rose, 2010; West, 2000). But the ease with which granular data can be generated and tracked as well as the faith that doing so will bestow greater control and reduce uncertainty has intensified such practices (Levy, 2015), suggesting that the logic of datafication has burrowed into the closest of human relationships.

Such datafication is occurring in a social context that places unrealistic expectations on parents (Douglas & Michaels, 2005; Gopnik, 2016). Mothers in particular bear responsibility for investing time, energy, and emotion into raising children and are penalized when they don’t, or can’t, do so (Bridges, 2017; Hays, 1996). Historically, mothers have also been the ones who manage family photo collections (Kuhn, 2002; G. Rose, 2010; Spence & Holland, 1991), a responsibility they continue to shoulder on social media (Ammari et al., 2015). Parents integrate

² I adopt a wide definition of parent that includes birth parents, stepparents, adoptive parents, foster parents, surrogates, legal guardians, and parental figures (i.e., grandparent, older sibling) who assume responsibility (whether legally or in practice) for another person. My examination does not include those who care for pets or plants, though these people sometimes define themselves as parents and post pictures of the objects of their care online. I leave that research to those in critical animal and plant studies (McCance, 2013; H. Stark, 2015).

digital technologies into their parenting activities but experience anxiety or judgment for the way they do so (Clark, 2014; S. M. Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Nelson, 2012). In this dissertation, I use governmentality to examine how power, manifesting as expertise, works through discourse to regulate parents' social media conduct. Three research questions motivate my inquiry:

RQ 1: How do expertise, ideas, and techniques link up to construct “oversharing” as a problem?

RQ 2: How do expertise, ideas, and techniques link up to construct “sharenting” as a problem?

RQ 3: How does expert discourse construct parent-child subject relations?

I study these questions by analyzing materials from three discursive fields—social media, news media, and academia. I use this analysis to suggest future directions for research on social media and privacy that goes beyond the gendered public/private boundary and engages with the world as a site of entangled relations rather than individual entities.

1.4. Organization of the Manuscript

This chapter introduced the “problem” of parents' social media use, briefly explained governmentality, and identified the dissertation's research questions. Chapter 2 traces the project's onto-epistemological shift from an interpretivist exploration of children's digital identities to a post-structural investigation of oversharing and sharenting discourse. It then explains governmentality in detail, contextualized within post-structuralism, discourse, and

Foucault's power/knowledge analytic. Chapter 3 maps what I call the "intellectual technologies of sharenting:" sharing, which signifies the corporate intermediation of social life, and parenting, which signifies the socialization of children into normal, or acceptable, members of society. Chapter 4 explains the methodological orientation I adopt, the methods I use to collect and analyze source material, and the evaluation criteria by which I believe the project should be judged.

Chapters 5-7 encompass the empirical analysis. In Chapter 5, I illustrate how a specific site of social media expertise, the once-popular blog STFU, Parents, constructs the problem of oversharing as a form of inappropriate social media use. In Chapter 6, I explain, how news media expertise constructs the problem of sharenting as a form of risk to children. In Chapter 7, I discern how academic expertise obliges parents to govern their own social media use by appealing to their subjectivity. Finally, Chapter 8 posits future directions for work on parents and social media using the concept of "leakiness" to go beyond the public/private boundary that influences conceptions of social media. It also offers entanglement as a key concept for theorizing privacy within the broader force of datafication that drives contemporary society.

Chapter 2: Tracing and Transforming Through Academic Inquiry

2.1. Those Words

I first heard the words “epistemology” and “ontology” in an introductory government and politics lecture during the first week of my freshman year of college. Dr. Grant-Wisdom³ wrote them on the chalkboard and I dutifully copied them into my notebook and took notes, admittedly not understanding very much of the lecture. For a long time, I had no other meaningful encounters with those words. I progressed through college, writing research papers and an undergraduate thesis. I worked as a researcher, conducting a content analysis for a magazine and interview studies for a consulting firm. I entered graduate school, wrote more research papers and a master’s thesis, and even published some of that work. I returned to graduate school to earn a PhD, wanting to make academic research my career. Three weeks in, during Dr. Kari Kraus’ INST800: The Engaged Intellectual class, those words, “epistemology” and “ontology,” re-entered my life.

The process of understanding these words has been the most rewarding and intellectually stimulating aspect of my doctoral experience. As my own experience affirms, it is entirely possible to conduct research without recognizing how epistemology and ontology shape it. But much like a chemical reaction irreversibly alters the molecules it involves, my engagement with epistemology and ontology over the past three years has so transformed my approach to research

³ The best name for a professor.

that there's no going back. I experienced "the crack...[where] you can no longer stand what you put up with before, even yesterday" (Deleuze & Parnet, 2007, p. 126).

I begin this chapter by summarizing the various paradigms that define what qualitative research is and how to do it. I describe my experience with one paradigm, interpretivism, and explain why I've chosen to leave it for another, post-structuralism. I then review post-structuralism and explain one of its central concerns, that of discourse. I end the chapter by explaining governmentality, which is the analytical practice that underpins this dissertation.

2.2. Paradigms and Figured Worlds in Qualitative Research

My research is largely qualitative: I talk to people through interviews and focus groups and analyze texts, including news articles, websites, company policies, and social media posts. These projects have focused on understanding meaning or lived experience in some way. What does it mean to someone to post baby pictures online (Ammari et al., 2015; P. Kumar, 2014; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015)? How do children, parents, and teachers conceptualize privacy and security online (P. Kumar et al., 2017; P. C. Kumar, Chetty, et al., 2019; P. C. Kumar, Vitak, et al., 2019)? How do librarians and low-income families navigate privacy and security concerns (Subramaniam et al., 2019; Vitak, Liao, Kumar, et al., 2018; Vitak, Liao, Subramaniam, et al., 2018)? What does privacy mean to someone using a fitness tracker (Zimmer et al., 2018) or intelligent personal assistant (Pridmore et al., 2019)? What do technology companies mean when they claim to protect their users' privacy (P. Kumar, 2017a, 2016b)?

Qualitative research can refer to any one of the plethora of paradigms that shapes one's approach to research, the types of materials researchers examine, and the processes they use to examine those materials. While qualitative research resists simple definition, broadly speaking, it involves "study[ing] things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 10). Scholars have identified five major research paradigms within qualitative inquiry, a paradigm being a family of aligned ontological, epistemological, and methodological commitments. Ontology refers to what reality is; epistemology refers to what knowledge is; and methodology refers to how knowledge is created (Crotty, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). These are easier to grasp when attached to specific paradigms (Lincoln et al., 2018):

- **Positivism:** This paradigm holds that a singular reality exists separate from our experiences of it (ontology), and that completely accurate, or objective, knowledge of this reality is obtainable (epistemology). Research should be grounded in the scientific method and aims to predict and control outcomes (methodology).
- **Post-positivism:** This paradigm subscribes to the existence of a singular reality but acknowledges that complete knowledge of that reality is not possible. Use of statistical methods can help approximate reality.
- **Critical Theories:** This paradigm holds that reality is characterized by power struggles, and that people can experience privilege or oppression based on socioeconomic class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or physical or mental abilities. Knowledge produced through the study of these social structures can empower people to change those

structures. Research should involve the participation of those at the margins and actively pursue social change.

- **Constructivism/Interpretivism:** This paradigm considers reality as socially constructed, meaning that reality is not something that exists independent of our experience but is constructed through our experience of it. As such, knowledge is co-created through the interactions between a researcher and the object of study. Research is dialectic, iterative, and involves the interpretation of experience.
- **Participatory/Postmodern:** This paradigm also considers reality as socially constructed but places less emphasis on rationality as the “best” path to knowledge. Knowledge is not the interpretation of truth but the experience of participating with the cosmos.

Five bullet points cannot distill an entire chapter’s worth of information, but even these snippets should convey the vastly diverging worldviews that underpin different paradigms. They are also a refreshing reminder that even though the term “research” is often regarded as a positivist or post-positivist activity that involves lab experiments and statistics, it is also so much more. I, despite having four years of interview research experience before entering the PhD program, didn’t know how much I needed to hear this until I read *The Foundations of Social Research* (Crotty, 1998) and realized that approaches like phenomenology and hermeneutics were legitimate, established modes of academic inquiry.

These five paradigms are not the only way of conceptualizing research. Michael Crotty (1998) sets aside ontology and discusses four elements: epistemology, theoretical perspective,

methodology, and method.⁴ Another approach involves a topology of five figured worlds that characterize distinct communities of practice in qualitative research (See Figure 2.1). These figured worlds are not fixed, mutually exclusive silos; they are “dynamic and self-organizing” with “blurry and fluid” boundaries and span the ontological/epistemological continuum from positivism to post-qualitative (Kamberelis et al., 2018, p. 693). I briefly summarize each figured world and then situate my work in the topology.

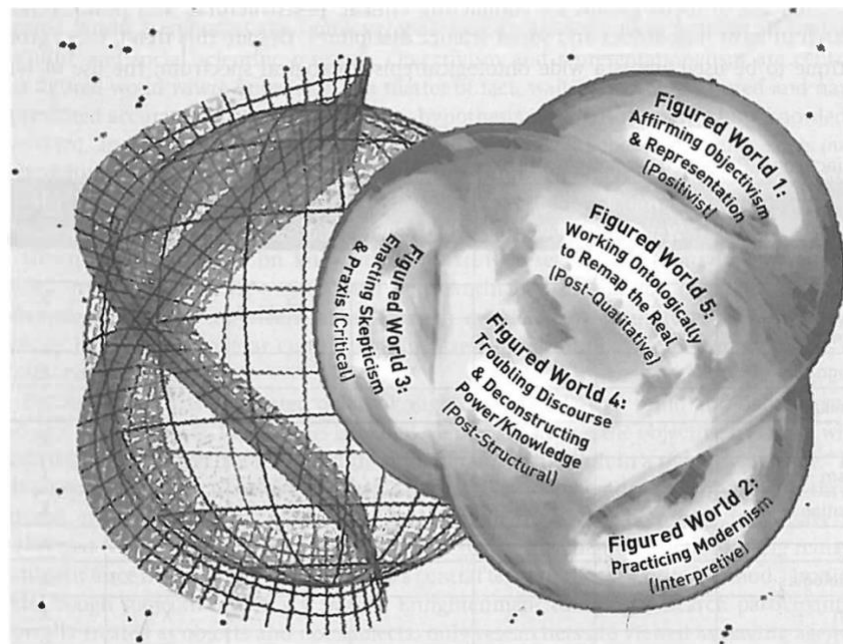


Figure 2.1: Topology of Figured Worlds. Source: © SAGE Publishing

⁴ I find Lincoln, Lynham, and Guba’s (2018) framework a bit more comprehensible, as I still do not understand the difference between Crotty’s (1998) conception of epistemology and theoretical perspective.

1. **Positivism:** As described earlier, this world regards truth as a set of objective facts that exist independent of human experience and can be verified through rigorous, systematic, empirical investigation. It relies on representationalism, or the belief that the search for truth relies on finding the correct mapping of symbolic representations onto phenomena being studied. For example, validated scales are valued in survey research because they are regarded as “accurate” measures of something that researchers cannot directly observe, like emotions or privacy concerns. Traditionally, research in the natural and social sciences operates within this figured world.
2. **Interpretivism:** This figured world differs from Lincoln et al.’s (2018) description of interpretivism. This world also subscribes to the existence of reality as separate from human experience but rejects the notion that knowledge objectively represents truth. It regards knowledge as socially and culturally constructed, largely through language. Truth is not a matter of one-to-one correspondence between a phenomenon and a symbol, but rather a consensus reached through experience, dialogue, and argument, as in the way a team of researchers might discuss their codebook and coding decisions when qualitatively analyzing interview transcripts. Thus, knowledge is tentative but a “soft faith in objectivity persists,” as the process of achieving consensus is seen as necessary to produce knowledge (Kamberelis et al., 2018, p. 698).
3. **Critical:** As mentioned earlier, this world focuses on power and how human activity reproduces power structures. This world is skeptical of truth claims, regarding knowledge as the result of ideology, invisibly privileging certain ways of being knowing over others.

Research should peel back these façades, surface their hidden meanings and contradictions, and liberate people from oppression. Language is a tool to help accomplish this.

4. **Post-Structural:** This world views knowledge “as an effect of power [that] is produced, reproduced, and transformed through discourses” (Kamberelis et al., 2018, p. 703).

Discourses (which include but are not limited to language) are not social facts; they are constitutive forces that produce subjects. The researcher, typically regarded as the knowing subject who examines an object of study, is just as intertwined in discourses (e.g., academic disciplines, institutional hierarchies, etc.) as what she studies. Research should acknowledge these discourses as it untangles the discourses that imbricate the object of study. Questions that in previous worlds focused on how knowledge comes to be are now questions about being; they shift from questions of epistemology to questions of ontology. For instance, rather than inquiring what a phenomenon is, this world asks why the phenomenon is the way it is, or how did it come to be this way?

5. **Post-Qualitative:** The most “embryonic” of the figured worlds, this one treats reality as “simultaneously discursive and material, individual and social, cognitive and embodied” and centers “affect, imagination, performance, space, and materiality” (Kamberelis et al., 2018, p. 706). Knowledge is the result of particular discursive and material configurations; change these configurations and new knowledge forms. Ontology is not a state of being but a process of becoming, and research is about opening different ways of becoming. Here, as in post-structuralism, language and discourse do not represent reality;

rather, they produce it. But where post-structuralism prioritizes discourse as the constitutive force, the post-qualitative world holds that matter—things and space—is just as productive as discourse. Post-qualitative research summons attention to non-human aspects of the world and regards their influence as agentic, a capability other figured worlds reserve for humans.

My experience with research most clearly aligns with Kamberelis et al.'s (2018) figured worlds. I find the research projects I mentioned at the beginning of this section fit better with Kamberelis et al.'s (2018) conception of interpretivism than Lincoln et al.'s (2018). In addition, where Lincoln et al. (2018) articulate a participatory/postmodern paradigm, Kamberelis et al. (2018) distinguish between post-structural and post-qualitative paradigms. This distinction matters for me, as I situate my current work within post-structuralism but envision taking my future research in a more post-qualitative direction. Before explaining why, I recount what compelled me to travel to other worlds.

2.3. Getting Stuck and Unstuck

As is obvious by now, I study privacy. I do so because I believe privacy matters and because I worry about how datafication affects privacy. Many scholars, lawyers, journalists, consumers, citizens, and people share these concerns. Before this dissertation, I had primarily analyzed what people and companies say about privacy. Early in my PhD experience, a creeping sense of disillusionment made me question whether this work mattered. Our research team interviewed people who used wearable fitness trackers, and we were drafting a paper about how

our participants thought about privacy in relation to their fitness data. While coding and analyzing the transcripts, I encountered quote after quote expressing sentiments like, “My data isn’t valuable,” “I don’t care if anyone sees this data,” and “I have nothing to hide.” To be sure, some quotes also described decisions to restrict data access by changing privacy settings or to avoid using certain features due to privacy concerns. But on the surface, many participants seemed to be parroting common tropes emphasized in media coverage of technology and privacy. Or maybe I, as someone attuned to media coverage of privacy, was primed to notice those tropes in the data. At any rate, it seemed like privacy was not a primary concern to most of the people we interviewed.

Further analyzing that data through a theoretical lens—in our case, Petronio’s (2002) communication privacy management framework—painted a more nuanced picture of the role privacy played in these participants’ use of wearable trackers (Zimmer et al., 2018). But that picture also suggested that our participants largely did not consider the collection of step or sleep data as a privacy concern and that the benefits of using fitness trackers outweighed any concerns they did have. I observed similar patterns across other projects. People queried intelligent personal assistants because they were convenient. Children played online games because they were fun. Low-income families connected to public wi-fi because children needed to do schoolwork online and parents could not afford broadband at home. These uses of technology could increase the chance of privacy violations, but people also wanted or had to use technology in these ways, and that was not likely to change. Conversing about privacy with participants also

grew repetitive. Their data wasn't important, they said. They trusted the companies to manage their data appropriately. They couldn't do anything about it anyways, so why worry.

So, what did participants' comments tell me about privacy? One interpretation could regard their views as wrong and requiring correction, but I believed this disrespected the participants. Another interpretation could surmise participants lacked privacy knowledge, which would suggest a need to educate people about privacy issues. While I applaud such efforts, increasing people's awareness is unlikely to slow datafication. Fighting for privacy always struck me as an uphill battle, but now it felt like scaling the face of a cliff. The genie of datafication would not return to its bottle, but neither would my belief in the value of privacy waver.

I felt stuck until education scholar Elizabeth St. Pierre (2016) pulled me out of the rut. I'd been using what she calls conventional humanist qualitative methodology: interviewing people and coding the data to capture some aspect of their lived experience. Qualitative social science often studies meaning-making—espousing the aims of phenomenology—but employs tendencies of natural science—carving the world into narrowly defined slices via research questions, systematically analyzing data to discern its underlying knowledge, usually through a series of coding procedures, and justifying this work by offering to fill a gap in knowledge, positioning the world as passively waiting to be known (Elizabeth A. St. Pierre, 2016).

I'd thought I'd sidestepped positivism because I didn't offer hypotheses, calculate inter-rater reliability, or predict behavior. I did, however, define research questions, collect data, and code it to fill a gap in knowledge—trappings of logical positivism (Elizabeth A. St. Pierre, 2016). I acknowledge that post-positivism has its place. Putting humans on the moon, to name

one achievement, would have been impossible without the ability to predict and control the trajectory of a spacecraft (though this was only one among a number of scientific, political, economic, social, and cultural factors that contributed to the Eagle's successful landing in the Sea of Tranquility) (Tribbe, 2014). But if prediction and control are decidedly not contributions to which my work aspires, why use procedures derived from that paradigm?

Because I was caught in what St. Pierre calls the rush to application. When doctoral education separates philosophy from methodology, and when a publish-or-perish culture equates papers with knowledge, “social science researchers *apply* empiricisms before they understand the assumptions and limits of the larger systems of thought in which they exist” (Elizabeth A. St. Pierre et al., 2016, p. 121, emphasis in original). I pored over transcripts looking to extract meaning while constantly questioning whether I'd used processes rigorous enough to produce valid results. Faculty mentors reassured me the work was sound and crafted language to quell skeptical reviewers. Many papers my colleagues and I wrote passed the vaunted gates of publication, suggesting that I was successfully learning to do research. But I felt no closer to engaging the concepts that captivated me in coursework—performativity, enactment, embodiment, materiality, assemblage, actor-network theory (ANT), post-humanism—concepts I sensed could yield fresh insights into privacy, if only I could figure out how to work with them.

For my first two years in the PhD program, I thought only two paradigms governed academic research: positivism and interpretivism. St. Pierre (2016) told me otherwise. No wonder I felt so stuck; concepts like assemblage and ANT could not be thought, let alone employed, in positivist *or* interpretivist paradigms. I needed new methods, but more important, I

needed to learn the philosophies that underpinned these concepts. Another year would pass before I encountered Lincoln et al.'s (2018) list of paradigms or Kamberelis et al.'s (2018) diagram of figured worlds and could finally situate myself onto-epistemologically.

2.4. Traversing the Figured Worlds

I began my research career by laying a foundation in the figured world of interpretivism. A dissertation demonstrates that one understands how to do research, so the straightforward thing would be for me to finish building that house. Instead, I've grabbed my backpack and set off exploring. Why? I hope the previous section makes clear that on a certain level, I had no choice. I've learned a lot from that foundation, and I take pride that work. But as I've delved into the thicket of research paradigms, the questions that attract me point away from interpretivism. Fortunately, the fields of HCI and communication house a heterogenous array of ontological positions, epistemological commitments, and methodological choices, a diversity that leaders in these fields regard as a boon (Olson & Kellogg, 2014; Waisbord, 2019).

In addition, both fields stand to gain from research that more explicitly engages with questions of ontology, epistemology, and the process of research. As HCI has grown to encompass the study of computing as a cultural process embedded in everyday contexts (Baumer & Brubaker, 2017; Bødker, 2006), scholars have called attention to questions of epistemology and methodology (S. Bardzell & Bardzell, 2011; Harrison et al., 2011; Irani et al., 2010). Grappling with philosophical questions surrounding personhood, the (post) human, and notions of space/place can open new directions for understanding computer-mediated communication

and designing technologies (Ess, 2004; Frauenberger, 2020). The (relative) novelty of the internet as a subject of academic inquiry can springboard deeper reflexivity surrounding methods, for instance through discussion of whether and how particular methods translate online (Hine, 2005). That is, questions about how to do research online provoke foundational questions about the implications of such research more broadly (Markham & Baym, 2009).

For me, aligning a research interest in parents and social media with methods to study it spurred questions about what I wanted this work to accomplish. Initially, I wondered how parent-created digital footprints would affect children's identities. If parents portrayed their children a certain way online, what could happen if children's developing sense of self didn't match that portrayal? Methodologically and conceptually, investigating this question posed challenges. While I loved the idea of studying a cohort of babies through adolescence, that was not a practical dissertation project. I also struggled to grasp what identity meant. Most literature I found discussed the psychological processes of identity development, which did not interest me. Classmates suggested I focus on a particular aspect of identity, like race or gender. Coursework plus questions about my own ethnic, social, and professional identities helped me accept that identity, far from being one stable, unified thing, is fluid, fractal, and conditional. Still, I clung to identity as the focus of my dissertation until this quote from feminist theorist Vicky Kirby knocked the cornerstone from identity's crumbling façade:

I'm trying to complicate the locatability of human identity as a here and now, an enclosed and finished product, a causal force upon Nature...I don't want the human to be in Nature, as if Nature is a container. Identity is inherently unstable, differentiated, dispersed, and yet strangely coherent. (Kirby quoted in Barad, 2003, p. 828)

A parent's representation of their child does not need to match their child's developing sense of self, because identity is not about accuracy. Identities can be messy yet still cohere. Certainly, misalignments between parents' representations and children's sense of self exist, but I no longer sought to study them. I'd begun sensing that my interest lay not in parents or children as individuals but in the relation that bound them together. Except for Blum-Ross & Livingstone (2017), I didn't see research on parents and social media grapple with this inherent entwinement.

Academic and news discussions focused on the risks and privacy concerns parents' posting posed for children. Like the media examples from the introduction, they often carried a whiff of judgment. These articles often described parents' posting as "oversharing" or "sharenting." While I appreciated being able to use one (admittedly awkward) word in lieu of the phrase "parents posting about their children online," these terms also unsettled me. Sharing, the dominant term for social media activity, connotes values of "openness, honesty, mutuality, equality, trust, and more" (John, 2017, p. 147). This sheen obscures the extractive business model that delivers immense profit to companies at the expense of privacy (Markham, 2016; van Dijck, 2013), a dynamic Dave Eggers (2014) captured brilliantly in his novel, "The Circle."

Like sharing, I sensed the words oversharing and sharenting performed some sort of discursive work. I wanted to understand what was happening, so they transmuted from descriptors to my objects of study. I sought a form of analysis that aligned with my orientations away from post-positivism and interpretivism. Foucauldian approaches, particularly governmentality, seemed best equipped to help me trace the interplay of risk, norms, and

judgment that coalesced in sharenting. When the committee agreed, my inchoate ideas coalesced into dissertation project.

Adopting governmentality carried me into the figured world of post-structuralism. Rather than study the actions and motivations of specific parents (e.g., what they post about their children and why) or the meaning of their posting practices (e.g., what is the significance of posting), I'm studying how discourses produce "oversharing" and "sharenting." My aim is not to define what oversharing or sharenting are but to trace how they came to be. My contribution is not a deeper understanding of what oversharing and sharenting mean but a better understanding of how oversharing and sharenting work to govern the conduct of family life.

2.5. Post-structuralism

The rest of this chapter offers a theoretical crash-course that lays the foundation for this dissertation's governmentality analysis. In this section, I explain post-structuralist theory and the role that discourse plays in it. I then articulate what research in the post-structuralist epistemology makes possible and connect post-structuralism to the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, whose body of work gave birth to governmentality. The following section then unpacks governmentality.

Post-structuralism refers to a form of theorizing taken up in literary theory, philosophy, and critical theory to inform the study of literature, thought, and emancipatory social research, respectively (Hurst, 2017). My interest in post-structuralism lies in its potential to work against

the tenets of humanism, or the centering of humans and their rational procedures for deducing truth (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2000).

Like all language, the term post-structuralism lacks a fixed definition. It embraces the assertion from structural linguistics that “language, far from reflecting an already given social reality, constitutes social reality for us” (Weedon, 1997, p. 22). This form of linguistics takes language as an abstract system composed of chains of signs. Each sign contains a signifier (a material indicator, such as a sound or visual) and a signified (meaning) (Belsey, 2006; Weedon, 1997). Words are not the only signs; “[i]mages, maps, traffic lights, gestures all signify” (Belsey, 2006, p. 44). For instance, the arrangement of the letters f-u-c-k, the spoken phrase “If U Seek Amy” (Spears, 2008), the gesture of a raised middle finger, and the emoji 🖐️ each signify something related (at least within the American English linguistic and cultural context in which I am embedded) while also remaining distinct. Signs gain meaning through their difference from other signs. For example, “whore” derives meaning based on its difference from “virgin” or “mother,” not anything intrinsic to the letters or sounds of w-h-o-r-e (Weedon, 1997).

Indeed, the connection between signifier and signified is arbitrary. That is, nothing inherently links a given arrangement of sounds or visuals to a particular concept. For instance, uttering “Yo cogo el autobus” in Spain means “I’m taking the bus,” while uttering the same phrase in Mexico means “I’m fornicating the bus.” Asserting that signification—the process of linking signs and meanings—is arbitrary is not the same as suggesting that language is individually subjective. I can decide that saying “Yo cogo un autobus” is innocuous, but if I say

it in Mexico, I will get funny looks. In other words, “[s]ignification is a matter of social convention” (Belsey, 2006, p. 45), not individual preference.

While meaning is not fixed in writing or speech, structural linguistics asserts that meaning is fixed in the system of language itself, in other words, that language (a system that precedes writing or speech) possesses a structure. However, this does not account for multiple meanings or changes in meaning, that is, how the same signifier can link to many signifieds or to different signifieds over time (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997). Post-structuralism responds by:

[P]ositing that the meaning of the signified is never fixed once and for all but is constantly deferred... Since meaning must always be deferred, we can never know exactly what something means—we can never get to the bottom of things. Once this idea takes hold, neither language nor philosophy can ever be the same. (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2000, pp. 418–482)

If meaning is never fixed, then language cannot represent a pre-existing reality. If meaning results from connections between signs, and those connections occur in specific circumstances, in certain places, and at particular times, then knowledge is never universal nor objective. And if knowledge is always partial and situated, then it cannot originate solely in the conscious, thinking mind of a human subject. A pursuit of knowledge needs to go beyond the acts of humans and the premise of a world governed by rationality. Post-structuralism, by eschewing Enlightenment rationalism, decentering humans as pre-given subjects, and attending to practice as constituting reality, enables this kind of inquiry (MacLure, 2013a; Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2000).

2.5.1. Discourse

Language produces texts, which encompass “not only books and documents but also utterances of any kind and in any medium, including cultural practices” (J. W. Scott, 1988, p. 35). These texts in turn produce meaning in historically and contextually specific ways. For instance, contemporary Western society regards sexual relations between adults and children as verboten, not to mention, criminal. In contrast, in 4th century BCE Greek society, “[t]o love boys was a ‘free’ practice in the sense that it was not only permitted by the laws (except in particular circumstances), it was accepted by opinion,” it was supported in educational and military institutions, and it was enacted in religious practices (Foucault, 1988, p. 190). How could a similar practice yield such different effects? Answering this requires attending to discourse, which “is not a language or a text but a historically, socially, and institutionally specific structure of statements, terms, categories, and beliefs” (J. W. Scott, 1988, p. 35).

To illustrate, let’s briefly compare discourses that constitute “adult-child sexual relations” in current and ancient times. Contemporary attitudes take sexual relations as appropriate when they are mutual. Laws in many countries establish an age of consent, and sexual activity with someone below that age is considered rape. However, France has no such law. Journalist Marie Doezema’s (2018) reporting examined this fact through discourses of legal rights, human development, and power dynamics, rendering it a problem that the country must rectify.

The article opens with a recent case of a 28-year-old man having vaginal and oral sex with an 11-year-old girl. His attorneys argued that she consented, but “[s]uch a defense flies in the face of legal and cultural consensus in most Western nations, and much of the world,”

Doezema writes (para. 3). The article invokes government data on sexual violence in France; medical rationale from the World Health Organization about children's developmental inability to consent and their susceptibility to manipulation by adults; wide judicial discretion amidst a lack of clear legal standards; and a cultural proclivity to ignore accusations of sexual assault against prominent men (exemplified by the country's sheltering of Roman Polanski).

The article traces this permissive attitude to the "cultural revolution" (para. 12) prompted by student protests in 1968. Amidst an atmosphere of sexual freedom, prominent intellectuals, including Foucault, publicly supported sexual autonomy among minors and faced a vocal backlash. Decades later, though "public opinion in France has evolved...the country's legal institutions have been slow to catch up" (para. 23). Doezema concludes by noting that French lawmakers were considering legislation to establish the age of consent at 15. Two months later, however, they voted against it, with a French high court warning "that setting a firm legal age of consent could be seen as violating an adult's presumption of innocence," potentially rendering the law unconstitutional (Farand, 2018 para. 9). In the face of scientific and public advocacy discourses that position children as needing protection from sexual harm, juridical discourse, operating through concepts of legality and adult rights, continues to position French adult-child sexual relations as unavailable for circumscription.

In the case of ancient Greece, ethical rather than legal discourse shaped the boundaries of adult-child sexual relations, something Foucault elaborates in *The Use of Pleasure* (1988). Adolescent Greek boys, between childhood and manhood, possessed a beauty "to which every man was believed to be naturally sensitive" (p. 213). Greek society regarded relations with boys

as natural, and for a boy to catch the eye of a potential lover marked the boy's high qualities. Inverting the concern surrounding the French age of consent, the Greeks encountered the problem of "what was the age limit after which a boy ought to be considered *too old* to be an honorable partner in a love relation?" (p. 199, emphasis added).

While ancient Greeks condoned adult male relations with adolescent boys, they grappled with its ethical concerns. Given the historical contingency of meaning, ethics in ancient Greek society differed from what many now recognize as ethics. There, free men acted ethically by dominating in their interactions. Women and slaves, considered inferior by nature, were subject to domination; as such, sexual relations where men dominated them were unproblematic. Adolescent boys had yet not attained free male status but would one day. Sexual relations place actors in dominant and subordinate positions, yet free men were not supposed to occupy the latter. The broader Greek concern with this practice "was not that [citizens] might be governed by someone who loved boys, or who as a youth was loved by a man; but that they might come under the authority of a leader who once identified with the role of pleasure object for others" (p. 219). The result was not to forbid the practice (recall the natural beauty of such boys), but for the boy to not exhibit pleasure in taking the subordinate role.

In each case, various discourses structure the terms through which the practice of adult-child sexual relations is to be understood. Today, it doesn't make sense to justify adult-child sexual relations based on a child's natural beauty (though the appeal to attraction remains dangerously potent, like when responses to sexual assault ask, "What she was wearing?"). Similarly, while it is tempting to accuse the ancient Greeks of violating children's rights, it is

important to remember that the discourse of children's rights did not exist when those adult-child relations took place.

2.5.2. What Post-structuralism Enables

This comparison between contemporary France and ancient Greece did not consider what adult-child sexual relations mean or why they occur. Instead, it sketched how discourses produce certain effects—the continued lack of a French age of consent or the ancient Greek tolerance of sexual relations with adolescent boys. Questions about what and why tend to presume the existence of stable or essential meanings (what is this?) and causal relations (why is this happening?). As post-structuralism rejects these premises, it pursues questions pertaining to the way discourse functions (how does discourse operate? Through what?) and what effects it has (Bové, 1990). This inquiry seems to offer “mere” description, my scare quotes alluding to the post-positivist tendency to regard description as an insufficient contribution. To that, I quote feminist scholar Claudia Castañeda (2002): “Description is a form of ontological politics; it makes a claim to the real” (p. 142). Following this, I take post-structuralist inquiry as transformational. It gives shape to that which often proceeds undetected and offers other ways of being. This mode of inquiry:

[C]an be employed to examine any commonplace situation, any ordinary event or process, in order to think differently about that occurrence—to open up what seems ‘natural’ to other possibilities. (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2000, p. 479)

The most powerful example I've encountered of post-structuralism's capacity to transform appears in education scholar Bronwyn Davies' (1994) book *Poststructuralist Theory*

and Classroom Practice. A student was about to drop out of Davies's class after experiencing the overwhelm and distress of her fiancé sexually molesting her five-year-old daughter and her "being forced by the legal structures to report him or risk losing her daughter" (p. 27).⁵ Davies suggested the student identify the discourses that were ravaging her life, examine how power manifested in each, and recognize where she could and could not act. The essay, printed in the book with the student's permission, traced her subjectivity through six discourses:

- Legal/child abuse/moral responsibility/punishment and self as law-abiding citizen,
- Childhood/innocence/vulnerability and self as mother,
- Sexuality/pleasure/marriage/trust/commitment/love and self as wife and mother,
- Brotherhood/care/protection/legal responsibility and self as righteous,
- Psychological/sickness/disturbance/normality and self as psychological case, and
- Psychic/trance/channeling and self as god/goddess.

The student wrote, "I can see from my pulling out the discursive frameworks why I feel so crazy and that I'm being pulled to pieces" (Davies, 1994, p. 34). I can envision a skeptical reader conclude that the student simply described her situation and reached the obvious conclusion that going through a traumatic experience can produce extreme stress. But reading the essay left me with the sense that tracing the various discourses enabled the student to relate to her circumstances differently, and as a result, to experience the material effect of regaining a sense of control over her spiraling life. If that's not transformational, then I don't know what is.

⁵ The student reported a "single session of manual oral genital contact" between the child and adult; it did not discuss a pattern of sustained sexual interaction between the child and adult in question (Davies, 1994, p. 28).

I, just by reading the essay, also underwent a shift. Child sexual abuse is high on the list of indisputably unacceptable things. Yet this essay forced me to reckon with the knee-jerk response that anyone who perpetrates it is automatically a bad person who deserves punishment. The student experienced torment in part because her own responses to the situation did not match the way she felt she should be responding. Her suffering, my discomfort while writing this entire section, and perhaps your own unease while reading it all speak to the power of discourse and its regulatory effects. Those icky feelings say, “*Why are we talking about this?*” Those feelings manifest power: they remind us that certain topics are off-limits, that they are not up for debate. “*Child sexual abuse is bad, end of story.*”

Post-structuralism resists such definitive pronouncements of meaning and opens space for investigating how such meanings came to be. Why does this matter? Because simply condemning something like child sexual abuse, proclaiming that it shouldn’t happen, and blaming those who find themselves involved in it not only does little to reduce its harmful effects, but it actually compounds harm. It makes people feel like they’re at fault when in fact, broader forces are at work. When meaning is fixed, people (and things) can be bad, wrong, or broken. When meaning is questioned and discourses are mapped, avenues for response open up. Post-structuralist inquiry helped the student work through her pain. Through her tracing of discourse, I grasped post-structuralism’s potency to investigate the “shoulds” that shape us all.

2.5.3. Post-structuralism and Foucault

Post-structuralist inquiry draws heavily (though not exclusively; see Belsey (2006)) on philosopher Michel Foucault's work on discourse (Bové, 1990; Davies, 1994; J. W. Scott, 1988; Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2000; Weedon, 1997), and I follow suit. Foucault himself resisted the label of post-structuralist, and he demurred to wholly eschew rationalism and humanism (Foucault, 1984a, 2003). As this dissertation project took shape, I initially struggled to reconcile this difference. How could post-structural inquiry rely so centrally on someone who did not necessarily subscribe to its commitments?⁶ The deeper I delved into post-structuralism, the more I understood that questions of classification and author-text relations are precisely what post-structuralism troubles. Education scholar Maggie MacLure (2013a) designated post-structuralism as a "contested term" (p. 167), both in what it means and who counts as a post-structuralist. She noted substantive theoretical differences among those often associated with post-structuralism, including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva.

⁶ For instance, I momentarily panicked when, at the end of "The Order of Discourse," Foucault's 1970 inaugural lecture at the Collège de France, he remarked offhandedly, "And now, let those with gaps in the vocabulary say—if they find the term more convenient than meaningful—that all this [discourse analysis he'd discussed in detail] is structuralism." (Foucault, 1984b, p. 133). This may have been a joke or sarcastic reference that I missed, but I was comforted nonetheless to read him state in a 1983 interview, "I have never been a Freudian, I have never been a Marxist, and I have never been a structuralist" 4/20/2021 6:39:00 PM. That said, he acknowledged that in his earlier work, "perhaps he was not as resistant to the seductive advances of structuralist vocabulary as he might have been" (Dreyfus et al., 1983, p. xii). This perhaps explains why scholars like Hurst (2017) label Foucault a structuralist. Dreyfus and Rabinow (1983) suggest that Foucault's earlier work approached discourse as autonomously regulating social processes and that his later work more critically examined how discourse is itself imbricated in those social processes it also regulates. While I initially found the debate about whether Foucault was or wasn't a (post)structuralist frustrating, I now see it as a testament that everyone's, even Foucault's, thinking evolves over time. A fitting reminder that the premise that any label can adequately capture something as complex as a body of work (or a person) is flawed from the start.

Post-structuralist inquiry resists straightforward links between author and text. On one hand, it challenges the centrality of the author, particularly in literary criticism (Belsey, 2006; Bové, 1990), questioning the way the “author is asked to account for the unity of the texts which are placed under [their] name” (Foucault, 1984b, p. 117). Centering the author endows them as the source of meaning rather than accounting for how culture delimits what meanings are available (Burchell et al., 1991, Chapter 3). The objective is not to erase the author, but to examine “who is speaking, from what position, in what context and with what political effect” (Davies, 1994, p. 18).⁷

Thus, while it is worth noting that Foucault the person resisted the label of post-structuralist, this does not prohibit others from taking up his work in post-structural analysis. Indeed, he resisted those who wanted to treat his work as “dogmatic assertions that have to be taken or left en bloc” and had no interest in “constructing a new schema, or in validating one that already exists” (Burchell et al., 1991, pp. 74, 85). Instead, he explained, “What I say ought to be taken as ‘propositions,’ ‘game openings’ where those who may be interested are invited to join in” (Burchell et al., 1991, p. 74). It is in that spirit that I aim to take up his work.

2.6. Governmentality

Post-structuralism provides the onto-epistemological foundation for this dissertation, meaning that this project examines how discourse constitutes reality as well as knowledge.

⁷ This is also a classic feminist move, developed through situated knowledges (D. Haraway, 1988) and standpoint epistemology (S. Harding, 1992).

Having explained post-structuralism and discourse in the preceding section, I turn now to governmentality, the analytical practice I employ to investigate discourse on parents and social media. Foucault introduced governmentality in the fourth lecture of his “Security, Territory, and Population” course at the Collège de France in 1978 (Foucault, 2007, p. 502), and it has been taken up and significantly developed across the critical social sciences. Put simply, governmentality examines how authorities intervene in the lives of individuals (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 1).

To provide the reader with sufficient grounding in governmentality, I first review how Foucault construed the process of government and its connections to power and knowledge. Foucault argued that governmentality arose out of the Western socio-political transition from sovereign power to biopower, so I also explain these two manifestations of power. I then go over the three means through which governmentality operates: rationalities, programs, and technologies. I conclude by considering what studies of governmentality enable.

2.6.1. Government, Power, and Knowledge

While the term government typically refers to the state and political rule, Foucault noted its broader application. Royals, politicians, and judges govern citizens in a jurisdiction, but parents also govern children in a family, teachers govern students in a classroom, priests govern parishioners in a congregation. The act of governing entails guiding or regulating the conduct of specific subjects (i.e., teachers govern students, not citizens). The art of government

encompasses management of the polity but also of the household, the mind, and the soul (Foucault, 2007).

Government operates on the premise that conduct can be regulated or controlled in some deliberate fashion and that authorities can enforce these regulations. Government thus rationalizes activity and assigns responsibility to certain actors. Through governing, those actors perform evaluative and normative functions: they judge behavior against a set of standards and reinforce those standards as ideals toward which those subject to governing should strive. Government enacts a particular form of power relations, one that operates through conduct rather than force or order (Dreyfus et al., 1983, p. 219). The notion of government as the “conduct of conduct” invokes the word’s multiple meanings: the leadership denoted in “conducting an orchestra,” the normative connotations of wanting to “conduct oneself” appropriately, and the ethical and moral obligations implied in a “code of conduct” (Dean, 2010).

Before differentiating government from other forms of power, we must recognize how Foucault approached power. Foucault explained that his work “in no way construct[s] a theory of power” (Foucault, 2003, p. 95). His goal was not “to analyze the phenomena of power, nor to elaborate the foundations of such an analysis...[but to] create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects” (Dreyfus et al., 1983, p. 208). This process enmeshes humans in complex webs of power, and Foucault found no adequate tools to study these power relations (p. 209). Conventional discussions treat power as a capability that certain people possess, as in, a university provost has power over college deans, who have power over faculty, who have power over students. This conceptualization of power, and theories of

power more generally, presume a pre-existing subject: certain people are provosts, deans, and faculty, and those people wield power. However, what these subject positions are varies based on historical and social circumstances. That is, to understand power relations in the university one must consider the historical and social specificities of the moment they are studying.

To examine how people become subjects, Foucault started not with power, but with resistance (Dreyfus et al., 1983, p. 211). For instance, an analysis of university teaching in this vein would start not with course objectives but with student evaluations. Such evaluations inform hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions despite mounting evidence that they disproportionately advantage white men and reinforce biases against women, people of other genders, and people of color (Flaherty, 2018). Resistance to their use in performance decisions is growing (Flaherty, 2019). Starting with evaluations not only demonstrates how student actions exert power over instructors but also opens questions about what is a (good) teacher and how can or should teachers be evaluated. This avenue of inquiry attends to the myriad and minute flows of power and their effects without attributing those effects to a specific person or cause. Most students do not intentionally give certain instructors poor evaluations with the goal of getting them fired, suggesting that the “problem” of teaching evaluations does not come from students themselves. Considering how various discourses (e.g., student as pupil, student as customer) and systems of oppression (e.g., sexism, racism) manifest in teaching evaluations would produce a clearer picture of the problem.

In this example, power actualizes when students fill out evaluations, when instructors read them and judge themselves, and when hiring, promotion and tenure committees use them in

performance decisions. Foucault argued that power does not exist as an independent entity, but that it “exists only when it is put into action” (Dreyfus et al., 1983, p. 219), specifically, action to modify other actions. That is, a relationship between two entities is not automatically a power relation; it becomes an exercise of power when actions between them serve to influence other actions. If an instructor walks into the classroom on the first day of class and sits in a desk next to a student, the two have a relation. When she gets up and stands behind the lectern, power comes into play because of a shared recognition that her actions seek to modify the actions of those in the classroom through the discipline of education. Relations of power do “not act directly and immediately upon others. Instead [they] act upon [others’] actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future” (Dreyfus et al., 1983, p. 220). In other words, power seeks to shape conduct. Foucault (1980) argued that power exerts influence through its connection with truth:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (p. 93)

Power is effective not because it has any inherent worth but because it legitimates truth.

The power of student evaluations stems in part from a broader faith in the value of quantification and the use of numerical data to compare people (Flaherty, 2018, 2019). These evaluations ask students to rate various aspects of their experiences on a scale, converting teaching and learning into numerical data. These data can then be compared against averages and used to rank or rate instructors. The evaluations aren’t powerful per se, they’re powerful because they produce a form of knowledge that for centuries has been equated with truth. This is why Foucault said he

laughs when people equate his work with the clichés “Knowledge is power” or “Power is knowledge,” “since studying their *relation* is precisely my problem. If they were identical, I would not have to study them and I would be spared a lot of fatigue as a result” (Foucault, 2003, pp. 98–99, emphasis in original).

The connection between power and truth/knowledge underpins Foucault’s development of the productive dimensions of power. Conventional discussions treat power as a repressive and negative force. The state enacts power by punishing those who violate its laws; the teacher enacts power by flunking the careless student; the parent enacts power by grounding the misbehaving child. This raises questions of legitimacy and abuse: are those performing the repression entitled to do so, and are their acts proportional to the trespass (Foucault, 1980, Chapter 5)? These lines of questioning associate power with the “force of a prohibition,” which Foucault regards as “a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 119):

If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression. (ibid).

Government, as an exercise of power, operates through production, not repression. In other words, government does not force people to behave a certain way; it invites them to.

2.6.2. How Power Manifests: Sovereign Power and Biopower

Having contextualized how Foucault approached power—as a force that materializes in relations and influences actions through production as well as repression—I turn to Foucault’s account of how power manifests and acts on objects. Historical shifts in this process opened new avenues for government to operate, and understanding these shifts provides context for contemporary studies of governmentality.

When monarchy and empire constitute the dominant political arrangement, power manifests in the body of the sovereign (Foucault, 1980), who exercises sovereignty over a territory. This sovereignty includes the subjects who reside in that territory, but those subjects do not legitimize the sovereign’s power. The sovereign derives power from the territory they control (Burchell et al., 1991, p. 93). In a liberal state, by contrast, power inheres not in the body of the sovereign but in the “body of society” (Foucault, 1980, p. 55). While a queen or empress literally embodies sovereignty, the body of society encompasses the individual bodies who comprise a given population (Foucault, 1980). The leader of the liberal state derives legitimacy from representing and supporting “the people.”

Foucault describes this change in the mechanisms of power within sovereign and liberal states as the shift from the “right of death” to “power over life” (Foucault, 1984a). Sovereign power includes the right to determine the life or death of others. In ancient times, this right was absolute, as it “granted the father of the Roman family the right to ‘dispose’ of the life of his children and his slaves; just as he had given them life, so he could take it away” (p. 258). Eventually, the scope of this entitlement shrank to circumstances that threatened the sovereign’s

survival. In both conditions, the sovereign exercises power over life by determining whether to kill or not—hence, the right to death. But in the liberal state, where leaders are supposed to serve the interests of society:

[D]eath that was based on the right of the sovereign is now manifested as simply the reverse of the right of the social body to ensure, maintain, or develop its life...One might say that the ancient right to *take* life or *let* live was replaced by the power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death. (Foucault, 1984a, pp. 259–261, emphasis in original)

Where the sovereign exercises the right to death, society demands power over life. To illustrate the difference, consider the Black Lives Matter movement. In early June 2020, demonstrators across the U.S. and around the world protested the police murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade and countless other Black people (K. Jackson, 2020). The protests did not start from the premise that the state possesses the right to kill; they started from the premise that members of society possess an unalienable right to life. They decried the systemic racism that permits American law enforcement to disproportionately prevent Black people from exercising this right. They demanded the American state fulfill its responsibilities to foster Black citizens' rights to life. This right to life includes more than survival, though as the Black Lives Matter movement lays bare, survival is not something Black people can take for granted. The right to life also entails rights “to one's body, to health, to happiness, to the satisfaction of needs, and beyond all the oppressions or ‘alienations,’ the ‘right’ to rediscover what one is and all that one can be” (Foucault, 1984a, p. 267)—in short, the right to thrive.

Foucault characterizes the power over life as operating through two poles. At the individual level, it works through discipline (Foucault, 1984a). Discipline is the process of

organizing space, time, and behavior and using surveillance to maintain this organization. Discipline materializes in the architecture, schedules, and rules that govern, for example, schools, prisons, or barracks, and it shapes the conduct of individual people (Foucault, 1995). Discipline, as a procedure of power, can effectively shape individual wills but is inadequate to shape the conduct of the “collectivity of living beings” that comprises a population (N. Rose et al., 2006, p. 84). At the population level, power over life works through regulatory controls, or mechanisms that enable intervention (Foucault, 1984a). Consider how rates of birth, mortality, or life expectancy signify population health. Changing those rates equates to changing the health of that population. Foucault labels these poles as an “anatomy-politics of the human body” and a “bio-politics of the population” (Foucault, 1984a, p. 262) and calls this form of power biopower.

Where sovereign power acts to secure and protect territory through the threat of death, biopower acts to manage and optimize populations through the promise of life (Burchell et al., 1991; Foucault, 1984a). Biopower operates by pulling “life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and [making] knowledge-power an agent of transformation of human life” (Foucault, 1984a, p. 265). This does not render life completely manageable, as our vulnerability to the SARS-CoV-2 virus reminded us in 2020. But it does yield a distinct instrument for evaluating life—that of the norm. Where sovereign power acts through the law, biopower acts through measurement against the norm (Foucault, 1984a). Through norms, biopower facilitates categorization (e.g., normal, abnormal) and justifies intervention (e.g., altering or eliminating the abnormal) (Foucault, 1980, p. 250).

Key to this shift is the “emergence of population as a datum, as a field of intervention and as an objective of governmental techniques” (Burchell et al., 1991, p. 102). Where subjects inhabiting a given territory are governed by the laws of a sovereign authority, members of a population exist “within a dense field of relations between people and people, people and things, people and events,” and government entails acting on these relations (N. Rose et al., 2006, p. 87). The implication is not that sovereign power has disappeared (it hasn’t), or that laws hold no force (they do), but that analyses of contemporary problems cannot solely look to the state or its laws for answers. They must look to the operation of government in its myriad forms.

2.6.3. Governmentality: Rationalities, Programs, and Technologies

Recall the explanation of government as the “conduct of conduct” and governing as the process of shaping the conduct of others. Biopower acts at the individual and population levels through a commitment to rationality, or the belief in solving problems using expert knowledge and deliberate, systematic ways of thinking (Dean, 2010). The term mentality invokes the collective dimension of thinking, and mentalities of government is are ways of thinking about the rationalities that underpin governing (Dean, 2010). Combining the terms government and mentality invokes:

The ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principle form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security. (Burchell et al., 1991, p. 102)

Foucault's portmanteau of governmentality "sought to draw attention to a certain way of thinking and acting embodied in...attempts to know and govern the wealth, health, and happiness of populations" (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 54). These ways of acting and thinking can be "explicit and embedded in language and other technical instruments but is also relatively taken for granted, i.e. [they are] not usually open to questioning by [their] practitioners" (Dean, 2010, p. 25). For example, in societies where pregnancy is highly medicalized, patients and doctors rarely question the norm of a 40-week pregnancy even though the length of pregnancy can vary by more than five weeks (Jukic et al., 2013).

Many scholars have taken up the concept of governmentality and cultivated it into an analytical tool for examining how particular ways of thinking and acting shape conduct. I largely draw on the formation of governmentality that sociologist Nikolas Rose and his collaborators have developed. They build on the work of Foucault, including political theorist Colin Gordon's influential interpretations of Foucault's work (Burchell et al., 1991; Foucault, 1980), as well as work in science studies (especially that of Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, and Ian Hacking), work on the economy as a unit of analysis, and work on professions and expertise (Miller & Rose, 2008). For Rose et al. (2006), an analysis of governmentalities:

[S]eeks to identify these different styles of thought, their conditions of formation, the principles and knowledges that they borrow from and generate, the practices that they consist of, how they are carried out, their contestations and alliances with other arts of governing. (p. 84).

The notion that an individual or population's conduct needs shaping suggests that something in their conduct appears problematic and should change (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 14). Governmentality analyses examine how this process operates. Miller and Rose (2008) discern

two distinct yet linked dimensions within governmentality: the definition of a given phenomenon and the means to act on and change it. On the first dimension, problems do not simply appear; they must be imagined, defined, and rendered knowledgeable. The forms of thinking that make this possible are called rationalities. On the second dimension, thinking alone does not enact change; rationalities need a means to actualize. This occurs through technologies, or “all those devices, tools, techniques, personnel, materials, and apparatuses that enable...authorities to imagine and act upon the conduct of persons individually and collective, and in locales” near and far (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 16).

Rationalities make it possible to articulate problems. For example, a subject in a medieval feudal territory could not claim that a law violated their liberty because subjects at that time had no such rights to speak of. This changes for citizens in a liberal state who in theory are entitled to liberty. Indeed, much of Foucault’s work examined the effects of the political rationality of liberalism (N. Rose et al., 2006; N. S. Rose, 1999b). In the context of governmentality, rationalities enable problems to make sense. However, rationalities are quite general; they alone do not define specific problems. For this, we need programs. Programs are forms of thought that employ particular knowledge or expertise to render problems amenable to intervention (Miller & Rose, 2008; N. S. Rose, 1999b). In the social sciences, programs take shape in theories such as the free market in economics, structuration in sociology, or personality traits in psychology. Public policy proposals and white papers articulate programs in a more applied fashion. Programs offer “procedures for rendering the world thinkable, taming its intractable reality by subjecting it to the disciplined analyses of thought” (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 62).

With rationalities and programs, problems remain in the realm of thought. One does not solve a problem by articulating a program, as evidenced by the countless policy proposals that languish in files or PDFs. Programs require mechanisms to be realized in the world, which is where technologies come into play. Diverse and potentially limitless, technologies include:

[T]echniques of notation, computation, and calculation; procedures of examination and assessment; ... devices such as surveys and presentational forms such as tables; [standardized] systems for training and the inculcation of habits;... professional specialisms and vocabularies; building designs and architectural forms [and beyond]. (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 63)

As this list suggests, government operates in myriad sites: homes, workplaces, schools, clinics, laboratories, boardrooms. Governing does not intervene through direct force, so something else must compel organizations, groups, and individuals to align their interests with the interests of authorities. Rose (1999b) argues that government operates through the powers of freedom, or the liberal mentalities of “respecting the autonomy of certain ‘private’ zones and shaping their conduct in ways conducive to particular conceptions of collective and individual well-being” (pp. 48-49). In other words, while the state does not dictate how people should act in all realms of life, authorities like policymakers, doctors, and researchers use various forms of expert knowledge to influence conduct. Governmentality is a means of tracing this process.

2.6.4. What Governmentality Studies Enable

Governmentality is not a tool of determinism. Authorities devise programs, but the world is not a programmed place (Foucault, 1980, “Afterward”). The process of problematizing, diagnosing, and intervening to change a practice or a phenomenon is not one of implementing a

solution to a problem but one of translating an exercise of power into reality. This translation involves linking various forces, actors, and interests across space and time (Miller & Rose, 2008; N. S. Rose, 1999b). Indeed, government operates in a much more ad hoc fashion than my fairly straightforward explanation of rationalities, programs, and technologies might suggest. For instance, Rose (1999b) explains that U.K. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's state reforms in the 1980s were not the realization of a specific philosophy but a mash-up of different procedures and instruments that happened to be available at the time. Only afterward did the rationality of neoliberalism offer a means to link them together into a seemingly coherent logic.

In the same way that Foucault's work is not a theory of power, governmentality is neither a concept nor a theory (N. S. Rose, 1999b). That is, one does not examine governmentality as an object of study, nor does one describe rationalities, programs, and technologies as factors or variables in some sort of model of human behavior. Governmentality is an analytical practice that enables one to empirically trace particular lines of thought, the myriad authorities that seek to influence conduct, the heterogeneous techniques that attempt to translate thought into action, the tensions and conflicts that arise, and the way various forces come together to shape the present moment (N. Rose et al., 2006, p. 85; N. S. Rose, 1999b, p. 21).

Governmentality studies do not describe phenomena or explain what they mean; they trace how patterns of relations coalesce into regimes of truth. Such studies do not flatten phenomena into examples of abstract theories or concepts, they flesh out and situate practices in historical and social context to demonstrate the contingent nature of reality. This work is empirical without being realist, that is, it examines the world without presupposing the form in

which that world exists. Finally, this work is not normative, but ethical. It does not judge whether things are as they should be, but rather, it opens space for such judgment, space for asking if this is the way we want things to be (N. S. Rose, 1999b).

In this dissertation, governmentality permits me to examine the conditions that have made it possible to say that parents who post pictures of their children online pose a threat to their children (Bessant, 2018). By asking what this statement implies about parents, children, and privacy in Anglo-American society, I open the possibility to imagine, and realize, different relations between them. In the next chapter, I connect governmentality to the sharing- and parenting-related concepts that underpin sharenting.

Chapter 3: Literature Review: The Intellectual Technologies of Sharenting

A conventional literature review chapter appraises the state of the field and identifies a gap, one that the dissertation presumably fills. However, the goal of my governmentality analysis is not to fill a gap in the literature on parents' social media practices, but to trace how expert authorities, including academic researchers, have turned such practices into a problem. I begin this chapter by explaining how discourse works as "intellectual machinery." I then review the intellectual technologies salient to the problematization of parents' social media use, separated into sections that relate to the two words that comprise sharenting: "sharing" signifies the corporate intermediation of social life, and "parenting" signifies the socialization of children into proper members of society.

3.1. Tracing Reality Through Discourse

Chapter 2 explained that government operates through realms of thought and action. Programs represent certain practices as problems, and technologies provide means for intervening to address those problems (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 32). Discourse is one way of tracing this process. Miller and Rose (2008) approach discourse as a "technology of thought, requiring attention to the technical devices of writing, listing, numbering, and computing that render a realm into discourse as a knowable, calculable, and administrable object" (p. 30).

Through programs, reality accretes into knowledge. Programs render objects "thinkable in such a way that their ills appear susceptible to diagnosis, prescription, and cure by calculating and normalizing intervention." For instance, to manage something called "the economy," one

must first articulate what processes and relations the economy encompasses. Economic theories do not describe a pre-existing entity called the economy; they bring the economy into being by differentiating certain practices as economic rather than political or natural (Miller & Rose, 2008, pp. 31, 62). Concepts like “gross domestic product” and “unemployment rate” enable economists to produce facts about the economy, which form the basis for defining problems, such as a country’s lagging growth rate or escalating unemployment.

These facts, or knowledge, inscribe reality through technology. Consider the following fact that NPR reported on May 9, 2020: “The unemployment rate in the United States is now at 14.7%, the worst since the Great Depression” (Simon & Rodgers, 2020, para 1). To calculate the U.S. unemployment rate, “highly trained and experienced Census Bureau employees” survey a representative sample of 60,000 households across 800 geographic areas about the “labor force activities” or “non-labor force status” of household members (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015, para. 9). The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics then aggregates and analyzes this data to produce facts like the unemployment rate being 14.7 percent.

Facts are inscribed “through a range of material and rather mundane techniques” (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 32). To measure unemployment, interviewers knock on front doors, professionals converse with laypeople, employees enter responses on a laptop, records travel to a central computer near Washington D.C., and data gets manipulated in software (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Calculating the unemployment rate relies on precise definitions, specific timelines, scientific authority, professional expertise, data management procedures, verification processes, internet connectivity, and more (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). These elements, or

technologies, come together to produce the unemployment rate, or in governmentality terms, to generate a number that inscribes reality into durable form (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 64). Closed businesses, falling bank account balances, unpaid bills, and the fear, anxiety, confusion, and boredom of millions of homebound people condense into the number 14.7 percent.

Technologies transmute reality into a “stable, mobile, comparable, combinable” form, which provides evidence for or against certain forms of intervention (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 65). In response to the May unemployment number, White House officials reported no plans to ask Congress for aid, something economist William Rodgers called “irresponsible” (Simon & Rodgers, 2020, para. 6). Rodgers surmised that the administration hoped for a “V-shaped recovery”—a sharp increase following the sharp decrease—whereas he sensed recovery would look more like a Nike swoosh—a slowly increasing line following the sharp drop. Solving the problem of economic collapse takes on a discursive character, in this case the shape of a line, and relies on knowledge produced from theories, data, facts, and models. The outcome of this knowledge is power, specifically the power to delimit sectors of reality, for instance, to pretend that combating the coronavirus pandemic and reviving the economy are zero-sum efforts.

The language of programs (e.g., “reopen the economy”) and theories of reality (e.g., Keynesian economics) comprise the intellectual machinery of government (Miller & Rose, 2008, pp. 31–32, 62). I envision this machinery, also called intellectual technology, as the building blocks of governmentality. I turn now to the intellectual technologies that underpin the problematization of parents’ social media conduct.

3.2. On Sharing: Corporate Intermediation of Social Life

Sharing used to be a neutral term that referred to dividing possessions. Over the 20th century, sharing became an act of communication, and eventually a form of intimacy—the hallmark of authentic interpersonal relationships. Sharing transformed from a social activity to a pro-social one: sharing is caring and not sharing is selfish (John, 2017; Kennedy, 2020).

Since its earliest days, the internet facilitated sharing in both the descriptive and normative sense. The internet and its precursors began as networks for universities and government institutions to share computing resources but quickly incorporated technologies for communication (Kennedy, 2020). These included email, listservs, newsgroups, bulletin boards, split-screen synchronous “talk” platforms, chat applications, and multi-user environments (Herring, 2002). The advent of the World Wide Web and commercial internet service providers brought many more people online. The earliest social network sites appeared in the late 1990s, and by the mid-2000s, sites like Friendster, MySpace, Facebook, Orkut, QQ, and many others gained popularity around the world (boyd & Ellison, 2007).

Between 2005 and 2007, social network sites began incorporating sharing into their branding, marketing materials, and policies. Notably, they moved away from encouraging users to share specific things, such as images or videos, and toward sharing “fuzzy objects” (John, 2017, p. 58), like their lives or their worlds, or even imploring users simply to share. Such discourse positions these sites as mediators of authentic communication, connecting people to content and to other people (Hoffmann et al., 2018; John, 2017; Kennedy, 2020; van Dijck, 2013). At the same time, these sites commodify social connectedness by tracking online

interactions, inferring user characteristics, channeling attention toward certain kinds of content, and profiting from the data they extract (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; van Dijck, 2013; Zuboff, 2019). Social media do not simply make the Web more social. They render sociality into a set of technical procedures, which in turn enables them “to engineer the sociality in people’s everyday routines” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 12). In other words, companies like Facebook turned sociality into something they can manipulate. Two processes make this possible: the translation of experience into data (datafication) and the transformation of individual websites into globally dominant platforms (platformization).

3.2.1. Faith in the Value of Data

Media scholars José van Dijck and Thomas Poell (2013) identify datafication as the foundational condition that drives social media. Early social network sites were services that enabled users to create profiles and link themselves with other users (boyd & Ellison, 2007). To create a profile, users enter information about their demographics and interests and upload photos or other multimedia content. Users can directly seek connections, for example, by searching for a specific person by name, but sites also automatically recommend connections (van Dijck, 2013). These recommendations are possible because the sites turn the user-provided information that populates profiles into data, which they then parse for patterns. For example, if Person A and Person B list the same hometown on Facebook and have several Facebook Friends in common, the chance that they know each other is high. And since Facebook bills itself as a

place for people to connect with family and friends, its recommendation algorithm would suggest Person A and Person B become Facebook Friends.

As use of social network sites gained mainstream popularity into the 2010s, the services themselves grew more interactive. Profiles shifted from static portraits to dynamic, multimedia streams of updates, with sites inviting users to post text, photos, and videos of what they were doing. Sites aggregate and display these updates to users, with complex algorithms determining who sees what (Ellison & boyd, 2013; Helmond, 2015; Hoffmann et al., 2018). What began as websites to view and comment on other people's profiles grew into platforms for relationship maintenance, entertainment, news, commerce, and activism (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). As more heterogenous activity occurs on such platforms, profiles contain a wider array of information, giving the platforms more data to infer each user's characteristics and interests. More content also offers more opportunities for users to click, Like, Favorite, and comment. Each tiny instance of "engagement" links data and users, contributing to an infinitely dense web known as the social graph (Ellison & boyd, 2013; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). The richness of this social graph, which renders social experience into a format amenable to computational analysis, enables marketers to target personalized advertising and media platforms to recommend videos, music, and movies (Ellison & boyd, 2013).

But social media companies were not the first to recognize the value of seemingly inconsequential bits of data. Social psychologist Shoshanna Zuboff credits Google with that insight. In its early days, Google used the collateral data produced when someone typed a search query, things like "the number and pattern of search terms, how a query is phrased, spelling,

punctuation, dwell times, click patterns, and location,” to produce higher-quality search results (Zuboff, 2019, p. 67). After the dot-com bubble shuttered several technology companies in the early 2000s, investors pressured Google to generate revenue and demonstrate growth potential. Despite forsaking advertising early in its history, the company started using that collateral data to infer characteristics about its users and to serve them personalized advertising. Patent applications suggest that Google recognized but ultimately dismissed the privacy concerns this raised (Zuboff, 2019).

Internet platforms are far from the only companies that orient their businesses around data. Big data, or the mentality of collecting and analyzing vast amounts of data to produce value, has captured the attention of business, academia, and broader culture. Critical data scholars danah boyd and Kate Crawford (2012) characterize big data as the interplay of technology, analysis, and mythology. My interest in datafication stems in part from its mythological dimension, or “the widespread belief that large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy” (boyd & Crawford, 2012, p. 663).

Such faith in data as truth is not new. Media historian Lisa Gitelman (2014) shows how 19th century practices of documentation, which involved the creation of data, became the primary mode of (Western) knowledge production and circulation. Digital media scholar Jacqueline Wernimont (2018) goes back further, drawing on records from the 17th century to show how people used media to create data about life and death and, in the process, shaping who gets to count. They and others remind us that data do not present a transparent window onto reality, and

that the process of collecting data is not neutral (Crawford et al., 2014; Gitelman & Jackson, 2013). Consider family photos as a form of data collection: such images typically capture joy rather than pain and portray family unity rather than tension (Chalfen, 1987; West, 2000).

These critiques focus on the onto-epistemological implications of datafication. They question what we learn from data, what realities we create through data, and what we overlook by relying on data. This is relevant for exploring the connections between parents' social media use and subjectification, or the way that data generated through social media shapes the parent-child relation. Chapter 7 considers this connection in depth. But critiques of oversharing and sharenting must also attend to datafication as a form of political economy (Cohen, 2019a, p. 71; Sadowski, 2019). Social media platforms are globally dominant corporations that accrue massive wealth from the data they extract, something their rosy rhetoric about helping people share their lives with one another actively masks (John, 2017; van Dijck, 2013). Before discussing why this is problematic, I first explain how social media accumulated such power.

3.2.2. From Social Network Sites to Social Media Platforms

What began as individual websites where people could create profiles and connect with other users (boyd & Ellison, 2007) now encompasses ecosystems of “platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection” (Burgess et al., 2018, p. 1; van Dijck, 2013). Over the first decade of the 21st century, people grew comfortable sharing information and socializing online, and Silicon Valley

saw an opportunity to attract more investment funding and regain some of the influence it lost in the dot-com bubble of the early 2000s (Burgess et al., 2018; Ellison & boyd, 2013).

Technology leaders portrayed the Web's social turn as giving rise to new forms of online participation, which would empower users and advance democracy (Helmond, 2015; van Dijck, 2013). Evangelists like Tim O'Reilly envisioned the Web as going beyond a publication medium to "an infrastructure to build applications on, a distributed system that could deliver software services" (Helmond, 2015, p. 3). Similarly, co-founder Mark Zuckerberg conceived of Facebook not as a social network but as a platform (Helmond, 2015; Hoffmann et al., 2018).

The shift from site to platform manifested through application programming interfaces, or APIs (Ellison & boyd, 2013; Helmond, 2015). APIs enable third parties to request data from an application and use it for another purpose. For example, the dating app Tinder uses information from Facebook to fill out a user's profile and determine potential matches (Helmond, 2015). From a user perspective, APIs offer convenience and personalized services (though such seamlessness is not something users completely welcome (Wolf et al., 2018)). From a software perspective, APIs enable platforms to collect data about interactions that occur outside their own sites (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Helmond, 2015). Through Facebook's Open Graph protocol, developers can tap into Facebook's social graph, which, as mentioned in the previous section, is the dense web of interactions that occur on Facebook. When external websites and applications embed social plugins such as Facebook's "Like" and "Share" buttons, they receive data from Facebook and send data back to Facebook (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013; Vaidhyathan, 2018). Facebook also requires external parties to structure their data in a format compatible with

Facebook's own systems. Thus, Facebook not only extends the reach of its data collection but also positions itself as the infrastructure around which other parts of the Web should orient (Helmond, 2015; Hoffmann et al., 2018).

Digital media scholar Anne Helmond (2015) calls this process the “platformization of the Web.” She and others consider platforms the “core organizational logic of the networked information economy” (Cohen, 2019a, p. 75). Platforms, which include social media and other types of companies, configure “networked digital communications infrastructures” in ways that maximize “data-based surplus extraction” (Cohen, 2019a, p. 40). The Web routinely facilitates social interactions, commercial transactions, educational experiences, health consultations, and more. Platforms mediate those connections, and they do so in a way that manufactures data, which they convert into wealth. Mark Zuckerberg's vision of a social Web is that of a “structured, preformatted, and traceable web;” for Facebook, “being social online means being traced and contributing to value creation for multiple actors including Facebook and external webmasters” (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013, p. 1360). Sociality is supposed to strengthen bonds between people. The automated and datafied sociality of social media platforms creates value for corporations (van Dijck, 2013).

Platforms downplay this extractive dimension by calling what they do with user data “sharing.” Their privacy policies typically contain a section on sharing with third parties, which can include other businesses owned by the same company, service providers, advertisers, and government agencies. Yet these policies lack clarity about what specific types of data companies distribute to third parties, making it difficult for users to understand where their data may flow

(P. Kumar, 2016b). Nevertheless, users must accept these legalese-laden boilerplate terms to use the services, which gives private companies immense leeway to tilt the consumer relationship in their favor (Cohen, 2019a, p. 44; van Dijck, 2013). By cloaking their operations under the veil of sharing and positioning themselves as neutral platforms for self-expression and communication (Gillespie, 2010), social media companies emphasize the pro-social value they provide the world while downplaying both the anti-social sentiments they stoke and the immense financial value they derive from their engineered version of sociality (Cohen, 2019a; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; van Dijck, 2013; Zuboff, 2019).

3.2.3. The Privacy Problem

Social media platforms position themselves as the social infrastructure that connects the world (Hoffmann et al., 2018; van Dijck, 2013), and they implore people to use these platforms to share their lives with others (John, 2017; Kennedy, 2020). Mark Zuckerberg, who leads the world's dominant social media platform, takes privacy as the antithesis of his mission to make the world more open and connected, arguing that people don't want or need privacy (Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 72). Nevertheless, Facebook's practices repeatedly encounter backlash for violating privacy, to which the company responds by offering features to let users adjust who can see what they post (Vaidhyanathan, 2018; van Dijck, 2013). Unable to eliminate privacy as a concern, Zuckerberg, and by extension Facebook, adopts a narrow conceptualization of privacy as control. In doing so, Facebook discursively and materially places the burden of privacy management on individual users (Hoffmann et al., 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 74).

This is not unique to Facebook. In recent decades, responsibility for privacy protection in the American context has shifted from government and corporations to individuals. The rise of sharing as the default activity of social media portrays platforms as passively collecting information that users consciously and voluntarily offer. The Web appears as a naturally public domain, where information exists for the taking, where privacy protections are scarce, and where people must be careful what they post. This obscures how platforms actively configure the Web to extract data from user interactions (Cohen, 2019a; Markham, 2016; Sadowski, 2019).

People employ a variety of social and technical strategies to manage interpersonal privacy concerns on social media, but these strategies do nothing to curtail platforms' access to data (Kennedy, 2020). Indeed, there's very little people can do about these data flows. Social buttons such as Facebook's "Like" and "Share" not only funnel data from across the Web into Facebook, but they also track individuals as they traverse the Web (Gerlitz & Helmond, 2013). Other dominant platforms, including Google, Amazon, Microsoft, and Apple employ similar tracking features, and opting-out is impossible (Hill & Mehrotra, 2019; Vaidhyanathan, 2018, p. 58; van Dijck, 2013, p. 172).

Through such pervasive data collection, platforms expose people to surveillance from corporations, governments, and peers. The dangers of such surveillance include individual consequences, ranging from reputational harm to imprisonment or even death, and societal ramifications such as concentration of private corporate power and erosion of public governance (Cohen, 2019a; Murakami Wood & Monahan, 2019; Vaidhyanathan, 2018). For Zuboff (2019), this surveillance threatens human nature by giving platforms the power to subvert free will and

modify human behavior as they see fit. However, her argument fails to investigate the exploitative logics of capitalism that underpin this surveillance (Murakami Wood & Monahan, 2019) and relies on the dominant yet flawed foundation of the liberal, rational, autonomous individual (P. C. Kumar, 2019b).

In contrast, legal scholar Julie Cohen situates platformization as part of the broader political economic transformation from industrial to informational capitalism (Cohen, 2019a) and unpacks how platform surveillance alters people at the level of subjectivity (Cohen, 2013). These distinctions matter because they construct the problem of platform surveillance differently and point toward different responses. Zuboff locates the problem in corporate leaders seduced by visions of social domination and appeals to democratic institutions to stop them. Cohen construes platformization as a condition of neoliberal governmentality and notes that power, in its capillary, protean form, always finds ways to resist.

3.3. On Parenting: Raising Proper Members of Society

The noun “parent,” meaning one who has or raises children, has existed in the English language for centuries. Only in the past fifty years has the word taken on a verb form that refers to a general process of parenting (“Parent, v.,” n.d.).⁸ While some scholars suggest that today’s parents experience anxiety because raising children has only recently become a high-stakes

⁸ Specifically, “parent” as an intransitive verb is new. Transitive verbs require an object; intransitive verbs do not. “Parent” as a transitive verb (e.g., “Saloni and Rajiv Kumar parented Priya”) has also existed for centuries, though the OED notes that this usage was uncommon before the 20th century. In contrast, “parent” as an intransitive verb (e.g., “By reading books like ‘What to Expect When You’re Expecting,’ women learn how to parent”) dates to 1970 (“Parent, v.,” n.d.).

process that they need to master (Gopnik, 2016; Nelson, 2012), others demonstrate that anxiety over one's parental duties is far from new (Grant, 1998; Hays, 1996). Even in the early 1800s, middle-class parents felt "such an intensified sense of responsibility for the proper upbringing of their children that many described parental responsibilities as 'awful'" (Grant, 1998, p. 14). This pressure is understandable given that "[c]hildhood is the most intensively governed sector of personal existence" (N. S. Rose, 1999a, p. 123):

The modern child has become the focus of innumerable projects that purport to safeguard it from physical, sexual, or moral danger, to ensure its 'normal' development, to actively promote certain capacities of attributes such as intelligence, educability, and emotional stability. (ibid)

At first, this sounds self-evident, even banal: of course, children need protection, their development monitored, and their faculties honed. But these orientations imbue children with particular subjectivities—as vulnerable, as vectors of pathology, and as future contributors (or burdens) to society. The figure of the child is defined by what it might become rather than what it currently is (Castañeda, 2002). Normal development is a goal to be achieved, and parents, drawing on the expert authority of medical, psychological, educational, and social knowledge, are responsible for shepherding a child toward that end (Grant, 1998; N. S. Rose, 1999a).

Where did this responsibility come from? Governmentality scholar Nikolas Rose (1999a) notes that centuries ago, authorities such as the church, the guild, and the local landowner "specified, monitored, and sanctioned the detailed aspects of personal, conjugal, sexual, and domestic conduct" (pp.128-129) But the rise of the sovereign state and urban capitalism weakened or broke those bonds and concentrated authority in the government and the market. The family emerged as the unit through which individuals experience the socializing processes

that render them suitable members of a liberal society. In families with young children, the forces that drive socializing processes include regimens of pediatric checkups, emphasis on play as a form of development, and notions of school readiness, to name just a few. The project of raising a child into what society deems a normal adult requires parents to adopt particular attitudes and perform specific actions. The family thus serves as a human technology through which the program of development occurs (Donzelot, 1979; N. S. Rose, 1999a).

The concepts of oversharing and sharenting, with their focus on what parents do with family photographs and anecdotes about children, seem unrelated to questions of child development. However, if family is where children are supposed to develop into normal adults, then society has an interest in the family being a coherent social unit and a source of identification and belonging. Family photography is one technique for creating the strong connections that constitute family bonds (Chalfen, 1987; G. Rose, 2010; West, 2000). If, as Nikolas Rose (1999a) argues, the modern family “can only function through the desires that its members have for one another,” (p. 206) then family photographs play a powerful role in sustaining that desire. Beyond enacting family togetherness, family photography also provides a distinct way of knowing, both oneself and one’s family members (N. S. Rose, 1999a).

3.3.1. Pics or the Family Didn’t Happen

Before the ubiquity of smartphones put a camera in every adult’s pockets, the birth of a child was one of the most common reasons for families to buy a camera (Chalfen, 1987). The notion that parents would want to visually document their children’s childhoods now appears

common sense, in part because it is widespread to the point of being considered banal (Chalfen, 1987; J. Hirsch, 1981; G. Rose, 2010). But there's no inherent link between a device for capturing light and the arrival of offspring. Visual culture scholar Nancy Martha West (2000) argues that this connection was created by one of the world's most iconic photography companies: Kodak.

Through an analysis of Kodak's advertising from 1888 to 1932, West traces how the company portrayed amateur photography first as a form of play and then as a form of memory, particularly valuable for capturing the early years of a child's life. Childhood, as constructed in Kodak advertisements, is not only a time of simplicity and innocence, but also a fleeting experience that parents will want to cherish. Kodak's ads with children from this period "dramatize the distance between adulthood and childhood, reminding parents that they should take photographs of their children in order to 'preserve what will soon be lost'" (West, 2000, p. 80). Captured in the present to soothe the parent's future self, the photograph is a vehicle for nostalgia (West, 2000).

The family has long been an object of artistic expression, appearing in works from ancient Egyptian carvings to Roman stone sculptures to Middle Age illustrations to Renaissance paintings, (J. Hirsch, 1981). In America, paintings depicting an entire family were rare before 1760 but grew more prevalent—among wealthy families who could afford them—throughout the late 18th century (Lovell, 1987). Of note, given the role of nostalgia in family photography, art historian Margaretta Lovell (1987) argues that the emerging centrality of the child in family

portrait paintings “involves an admiration for, perhaps even a nostalgia for, the special state of childhood, as it was newly perceived” (p. 257).

By the mid-19th century, portrait studios across the U.S. and Europe used newly developed photography technologies to create images of families. People began exchanging *carte-de-visites*, 2.5-inch-by-4-inch photos pasted onto a cardboard backing, and keeping them in albums (J. Hirsch, 1981; Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011). By the turn of the 20th century, families could create portraits with their own cameras. But given that “there was no obvious household product preceding the consumer camera” (Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011, p. 55), what were people supposed to do with the device? Kodak, the most successful camera manufacturer of the time, first marketed the camera as a form of play, inviting people to take photographs while relaxing on vacation, sitting in a park, going for a drive, playing tennis, swimming at a beach, or cavorting at a carnival. Such campaigns were aspirational more than functional, given that these leisure activities were typically accessible only to the wealthy (West, 2000).

The tone of Kodak’s advertising shifted over the early 20th century, emphasizing snapshot photography as primarily oriented toward the home (Chalfen, 1987; Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011; West, 2000). For instance, where the famed “Kodak Girl” once roamed freely about the city or along the seaside, she now gazed at her family or her children, “her camera now held down at her side as if the act of taking the picture is secondary to the nostalgic sentiment that prompts the photograph... What used to be spontaneous play has now been transformed into the obligatory act of preserving childhood on film” (West, 2000, p. 15). While advances in technology that enabled amateur photographers to capture high-quality images indoors likely played a role in this

transition, West (2000) argues that it belied a deeper change in Kodak's ethos "toward promoting photography as privatized memory" (p. 13). Private because it unfolds largely in the domestic sphere (Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011) and because the audience is restricted to family members or close friends (Chambers, 2003).

Echoing the 19th century *carte-de-visites* albums, mothers organize their family photos in albums. Family albums showcase happy moments and milestones that exuded family cohesion (often regardless of whether family members feel such cohesion) (Chalfen, 1987; Chambers, 2003; M. Hirsch, 1997; Kuhn, 2002; G. Rose, 2010; Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011; Spence & Holland, 1991; West, 2000). Family albums attract criticism for their idealized representations of family life and reliance on women's labor (Chambers, 2003; Kuhn, 2002; Spence & Holland, 1991). Nevertheless, some women see photography as central to enacting their identities as mothers, especially when children are young (L. Harding, 2016; Humphreys, 2018; G. Rose, 2010; Titus, 1976). Visual culture scholar Gillian Rose (2010) examined how middle-class British mothers managed, arranged, and displayed family photographs at home and how they disseminated the images to relatives and friends. Rose argues that these processes, along with the materiality of the (analog or digital) photos, construct a sense of family togetherness. The process of creating, exchanging, and reflecting on media traces, whether family photographs in an album or notes of developmental milestones in a baby book, is way to embody one's social role and strengthen one's relationship with others (Humphreys, 2018). In other words, when a woman records the date of her baby's first steps and sends a video of the moment to her parents, she brings to life her maternity.

For the women Rose (2010) interviewed, taking and managing family photographs is “an obligation, but one they enjoy” (p. 130). Paging through family albums elicited a sense of happiness in them. The women recognized that this was by design, having photographed only the happy moments. Rose resists the common feminist critique that family photography “naively reproduce[s] dominant ideologies of domestic femininity” (p. 8). Instead, she argues that through family photography, women negotiate the pressure of being a good mother and the burden that responsibility imposes. Children, especially babies, demand near constant attention, regardless of what Mom would rather be doing. Photos of children can be cooed at and then tucked away, whenever it suits Mom.

Returning to governmentality, society governs families “not through mechanisms of social control and subordination of the will, but through the promotion of subjectivities, the construction of pleasures and ambitions, and the activation of guilt, anxiety, envy, and disappointment” (N. S. Rose, 1999a, p. 213). Through family photography, women step into the subject position of mother, experience intense feelings of connection to their child, and reckon with what has passed (as in “they grow up so fast”). Importantly, family photography doesn’t make the burdens disappear; it makes them easier to bear. Family photography is a crucial component of what Nikolas Rose (N. S. Rose, 1999a) calls the responsible autonomous family. This family learns the “right” way to be a family by absorbing expert advice proffered through media, marketing, and self-reflection and finding its own internal mechanisms, like curating family memories, to cope with the demands of it all.

3.3.2. The Private Family?

Society demands a lot from families. Through the institution of family, the labor force reproduces; women care for the young, elderly, and infirm without compensation; workers find respite from the alienation of work (N. S. Rose, 1999a, p. 126). These economic benefits may not be the first that come to mind when one thinks of family, which is evidence of the durability of the public/private distinction that drives hetero-patriarchial capitalism.

Before the rise of capitalism, political and economic dimensions of life were far more integrated with personal and community relations, with no stark differentiation between public and private. Following the Enlightenment, liberal capitalism prioritized equal rights and independence in political and economic arrangements, at least for humans of white male persuasion. Since care and dependence contradicted these values, they were relegated to other realms of life—those of personal and domestic affairs. Labor responsibilities that used to be more diffuse coalesced around gender lines, restricting women to domestic work in the home or volunteer work outside it. The cult of the independent, self-made man worked because the cult of domesticity ensured a woman took care of his needs (Coontz, 2000, pp. 45–53).

The political and economic realms that embodied capitalistic values occupied public consciousness. Personal and emotional needs, increasingly situated in kin rather than broader community relations, sat outside this public consciousness in a private domain. Private because it was seen to sit outside the reach of political and economic intervention as well as outside the view of the public (Coontz, 2000; N. S. Rose, 1999a). The latter defines academic understandings of family privacy.

Family sociologists treat privacy as the boundary that shields family activities from view. These boundaries grew after industrialization, as fewer households took in boarders, family sizes decreased, family activities moved out of public squares or porches and into backyards or houses, and those dwellings gave each member their personal space. Sociologists argue that these privacy boundaries protect families from social control and grant them autonomy, offering couples and parents flexibility in the way they enact their roles. Too much privacy, however, may allow deviant behavior like abuse to fester (Berardo, 1998; Laslett, 1973).

One problem with this visibility-based conception of family privacy is that it ignores the fact that family life also occurs in the public sphere. Indeed, the public sphere is not “a single, vast, open social space, but...a complex, multi-layered warren of zones and sub-spaces with different degrees and forms of privacy attached to them and different forms of inter-connections between them” (Fahey, 1995, p. 690). More recent theoretical and empirical work on privacy in the context of personal or family relations goes beyond the public/private dichotomy. This work focuses on how people negotiate boundaries with close relations and how digital technologies reshape their practices (Nippert-Eng, 2010; Petronio, 2002, 2010). Nevertheless, these approaches still treat privacy as something that people, whether consciously or unconsciously, manage or even control.

The whole concept of family privacy has faced critique from feminist scholars for shielding women’s interests from public attention (Allen, 1988; Gavison, 1992). But while public discourse may treat family interests as private matters, state and economic actors have long intervened in family activities, through philanthropy, legal, and judicial means (Coontz,

2000; N. S. Rose, 1999a; Solove, 2008). Such intrusions can be so pervasive for some people, such as pregnant low-income Black women, that anthropologist and legal scholar Khiara Bridges (2017) argues they effectively have no privacy rights at all.

Beyond these profound questions of whom family privacy protects, there is also the question of how family privacy operates when everyday life is datafied. For instance, some treat the posting family photos online as moving them from the private space of the home into the public space of the Web (Pauwels, 2008; Sarvas & Frohlich, 2011). Rose (2010) eschews the public/private distinction and actively avoids calling family photography a private practice, arguing that the flows in which family photographs circulate are too diverse to be simplified as public or private. I follow suit, studying what happens when family photographs flow into sociotechnical systems that *simultaneously* occupy a domestic family setting and a networked media setting.

With the intellectual foundations of post-structuralism, governmentality, sharing, and parenting in place, the next chapter explains my methodological orientation and the criteria by which this dissertation should be evaluated.

Chapter 4: Studying Three Discursive Fields

In Chapter 2, I laid this dissertation's onto-epistemological foundation in the figured world of post-structuralism. In Sections 2.6 and 3.1, I explained how I employ the analytical technique of governmentality to investigate discourses about parents and social media. In this chapter, I explain my methodological orientation and the methods I use to answer the dissertation's research questions. I conclude by offering the criteria upon which I believe readers should evaluate this dissertation.

4.1. Methodological Orientation: Toward Method Assemblage

Chapter 2 traced my shift away from the post-positivist and interpretivist paradigms and toward post-structural and post-qualitative approaches to scholarly inquiry. Methodology presents a point of praxis, where the ideas underpinning these paradigms actualize in specific projects on particular topics using some sorts of source material—in short, how we *do* research. Too often though, how we do research appears formulaic. Many factors contribute to this: doctoral education that lacks emphasis on the onto-epistemological foundations that underpin research methods, academic cultures that pressure researchers to churn out publications, authorities that value data- and evidence-driven forms of knowledge (Barnacle, 2005; E. St. Pierre, 2014; Elizabeth A. St. Pierre, 2016).

Conventional social science instills in researchers the belief that “if only you do your methods properly... you will discover specific truths about which all reasonable people can at

least temporarily agree” (Law, 2004, p. 9). This belief rests on certain assumptions about reality that many take for granted: that reality exists externally, “out there,” beyond the researcher (and beyond us humans), that reality exists independent of us, that this external reality existed before we did, that its existence takes a defined form, and that reality exists as a singular entity shared among all beings (Law, 2004). Yet most research paradigms beyond post-positivism acknowledge at least some degree of social construction—that humans and other entities play an active role in bringing reality into being (Kamberelis et al., 2018; Lincoln et al., 2018). This introduces indeterminateness into reality; it means reality is not entirely knowable.

Typically, when we find vagueness or indefiniteness in our research, we ask if it is the result of methodological failure. This may sometimes be the case, but science and technology studies scholar John Law (2004) argues “that (social) science should also be trying to make and know realities that are vague and indefinite because *much of the world is enacted in that way*. In which case it is need of a broader understanding of its methods” (p. 14, emphasis in original). He offers method assemblage as an orientation toward method that embraces the partial and situated characteristics of knowledge (D. Haraway, 1988; S. Harding, 1992). Method assemblage does not deny that reality exists; it asserts that research entails enacting “relations that make some things (representations, objects, apprehensions) present ‘in-here’, whilst making others absent ‘out-there’” (Law, 2004, p. 14). This means that when I study oversharing and sharenting, I actively bring certain aspects of family life, digital culture, and political economy to the fore and set aside or completely overlook other aspects. Mine is not a complete account of either concept because a complete account is impossible.

Law (2004) is not the first nor only scholar to critique the notion of method as a set of instructions. Post-structuralism eschews prescriptive approaches to research and instead asks for genuine engagement with the ideas of scholars like Foucault (Graham, 2005; E. St. Pierre, 2014). Indeed, my grasp of governmentality undeniably deepened when I read Foucault's work and, more crucially, when I wrote Section 2.6. However, like Miller and Rose (2008), I do not intend to be a Foucauldian scholar. I readily acknowledge and build upon the foundation that Foucault's work provides, incorporating concepts and perspectives from media and communication, HCI, science and technology studies, surveillance studies, and legal studies in my effort to conduct a governmentality analysis of parents' social media conduct. I embrace Law's (2004) metaphor of method assemblage as a form of gathering, "a process of bringing together, relating, picking, meeting, building up, or flowing together" (p. 160) to enact a particular form of reality. Most important, method assemblage invites creativity into the research process.

Governmentality as a method also embraces such creativity. In lieu of instructions, it offers "a certain ethos of investigation, a way of asking questions, a focus not upon why certain things happened, but how they happened and the difference that made in relation to what had gone before" (N. Rose et al., 2006, p. 101). For guidance on how exactly to go about the research process without falling into the trap of rote imitation, I have found inspiration in post-qualitative inquiry. This entails starting with but going beyond post-structuralism, resisting the concept of method and experimenting to create something that may not even resemble conventional research (Kamberelis et al., 2018; E. St. Pierre, 2014; Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2019).

In this vein, I take up education scholar Maggie MacLure's (2013b) call to de-emphasize the rational aspects of our engagement with data, which see data as something to classify, interpret, or represent, and attend to the engagement as a form of wonder. Wonder is both cognitive and material, a thought and a feeling. A striking turn of phrase in a document or a pregnant pause during an interview may provoke an idea in a researcher's mind and elicit emotions in her body, from a sinking feeling in the gut to the pounding heart of anticipation. The data acts on the researcher as much as she acts on it. They are entangled; indeed, it's not actually clear where she ends and the data begins (Barad, 2007; MacLure, 2013b). It is with this orientation that I now explain my process for conducting a governmentality study.

4.2. Assembling Source Material

In a conventional write-up, this section would be titled "Data Collection" and the following would be "Data Analysis." Researchers often automatically refer to the materials they work with as data, implicitly endorsing the subject-object divide that defines post-positivism. An agentic subject—the researcher—collects, analyzes, or interprets a brute, inert, and disorganized object—the data—exerting control over it and deriving meaning from it (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2018; Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2013). Yet this division does not exist in a post-structuralist figured world where subjectivity is not pre-given. The agentic researcher does not precede the data she collects (Barad, 2007; MacLure, 2013b). In addition, the notion that data simply exists, out there, waiting to be collected and examined, is precisely what method assemblage resists (Law, 2004; Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2013).

This dissertation examines materials from three fields of discourse—social media, news media, and academia. The umbrella of governmentality unites these materials in this dissertation. However, the materials began as three distinct datasets for three separate projects early in my PhD career, when I still resided in the figured worlds of post-positivism and interpretivism. Below, I explain my methods for gathering the materials and reconciling them with the post-structuralist commitments of this dissertation project.

4.2.1. From a Dataset of Blog Posts to a Field of Social Media Discourse

During my first year in the PhD program, I devised a research project to study emerging norms of parental online sharing. I turned to STFU, Parents, a Tumblr-based snarky parenting blog dedicated to commentary on oversharing, as a site for data collection. I used Tumblr's API to randomly select 10 percent of the blog's posts, creating a dataset of 162 posts. I then conducted three rounds of thematic analysis to discern what emerging norms the blog advocated parents follow when using social media. I presented the analysis at two conferences (P. Kumar, 2017b, 2018). My analysis straddled post-positivism and interpretivism, using a sample of blog posts to represent the blog's broader meaning.

For the dissertation, I sought to investigate how STFU, Parents acted to govern parents' social media conduct. As a starting point, I re-familiarized myself with the 162 posts. I focused on the content of the posts, the tone of the commentary, and my own emotional reactions. My attention then turned to the blog. I examined the blog's informational pages, reviewed press coverage of the blog, and compared its current appearance to snapshots of its earlier days

captured in the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine. I focused on how discursive and material elements dynamically defined what STFU, Parents was trying to accomplish, where it directed its attention, how others responded to STFU, Parents, and how STFU, Parents responded in turn.

I also delved more deeply into the blog's content, following multiple pathways through its posts. I reviewed the author's list of her favorite posts, her list of the blog's most commented posts, and her annual round-up posts where she highlighted her favorite posts of the year. The Tumblr archive interface offered another entry into the blog. I reviewed posts from the blog's first month and posts sorted by the tags assigned by the blog's author. The blog posts themselves are highly intertextual, with copious hyperlinks to other STFU, Parents posts. I sometimes followed these links and read related posts and comments, though this was challenging because a technical issue with the blog's domain name meant some of these links didn't function properly. In 2011, the blog's author began writing a column under the STFU, Parents moniker for Mommyish, a parenting website. Mommyish maintains an archive of STFU, Parents's columns, which I traversed in a similar fashion as the blog posts. I also examined the blog author's book, *STFU, Parents: The Jaw-dropping, Self-indulgent, and Occasionally Rage-inducing World of Parent Overshare* (Koenig, 2013), which followed a similar format to the blog but largely presented original content.

4.2.2. From a Dataset of News Articles to a Field of News Discourse

For my integrative paper, which is the doctoral program's milestone for achieving candidacy, I devised a study about how news media were framing discussions about parents

posting pictures of their children on social media. To create a dataset of news articles, I searched the NexisUni (formerly LexisNexis) database in early 2018 for articles that mentioned the terms, “parents posting pictures of children online,” including variants of common words (“photo” or “picture,” “child” or “baby,” “internet” or “online”).”⁹ To manage the scope, I limited the search to English-language results from U.S.-based newspapers, blogs, magazines, or web publications. I chose not to use “sharenting” as a search term because I wanted to include journalistic coverage about this topic dating back to the time that social media platforms were gaining mainstream popularity. For this reason, the date range for the search began in 2006, the year Facebook opened for general public use (Carolyn, 2006).

The search yielded nearly 4,300 results, and I needed to identify which were relevant for my analysis. Since at the time I was still operating in the confines of conventional qualitative methods, I approached this as a classification task. Most of the articles were completely unrelated to parents’ use of social media, and I set those aside. Of the remaining 535 articles, I removed 164 duplicates and 142 articles that simply stated that parents post about children online, with no elaboration. This left 229 articles about parents’ use of social media. As I read these articles, I found that they referenced an additional 14 news articles about parents and social media use, which I also included in the analysis. The final collection includes 243 articles published between 2006 and 2018.

⁹ Specifically, I used this search command: (parent* AND post* w/3 photo* OR picture* AND bab* or child* AND internet OR online). The “w/3” function permits a gap of up to three words between parent* and the others.

St. Pierre (2014; 2019) has cautioned against inserting post-qualitative inquiry into preexisting research methodologies. I grappled with whether treating this set of news articles, which I initially collected for a project straddling post-positivism and interpretivism, as a discursive field was compatible with the post-structuralist/post-qualitative orientations of the dissertation. I re-read my integrative paper's methods section and noted its scientific veneer, reporting precise numbers and distinct categories. But when I recalled the process in my mind, I remembered that, despite what I wrote in the paper, the justifications succeeded, not preceded, the decision. My gut knew which articles were and were not relevant for my research, and I then devised categories to supply an external reason for excluding them. I reported them in the reverse because "using your gut" is not scientific. Nevertheless, my integrative paper and this dissertation both examine how news articles discursively construct parents' social media use as a problem, so the underlying reason for selecting those articles still resonated.

Furthermore, education scholars and qualitative theorists Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2012) demonstrate how conventionally collected materials—in their case, interview data—can align with post-structural and post-qualitative research orientations. They call methods of data collection and analysis "failed from the start" (p. viii), because no method will fully represent an underlying reality or capture an entire truth. Post-structural work eschews representationalism and recognizes all truth as partial. Acknowledging methods as failed practices doesn't mean we have to give them up; rather, "we work the[ir] limits" and attend to what happens when we as

researchers engage with the materials at hand (A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. ix).¹⁰ Taking solace in their words, I felt comfortable treating my collection of news articles not as a dataset but as a discursive field to analyze as part of the dissertation.

4.2.3. From a Dataset of Research Articles to a Field of Academic Discourse

During the integrative paper project, I sensed the term “sharenting,” when it appeared in the news articles, did more than describe a parental activity; it coalesced a kind of worldview that I wanted to investigate. Since 2013, I’d followed research on the topic of parents and social media use, and by 2018 I observed the term “sharenting” gain traction in academic papers. I devised a study to examine how academic research discursively constructed the concept of “sharenting.” Still straddling the post-positivist and interpretivist paradigms, I saw my first task as collecting a dataset of academic articles on the topic. In late 2018, I searched for the term “sharenting” in a variety of academic databases, and I could count the total number of results on two hands. I knew more research existed, so I turned to Google Scholar, where a search for “sharenting” returned almost 20 times more results. A librarian explained to me that academic databases typically organize material using a predefined list of terms, called a controlled

¹⁰ The futility of representationalism was poignantly underscored in October 2020, when I noticed that the STFU, Parents blog URL returned an error message. If I were doing a post-positivist or interpretivist project that analyzed a sample of blog posts to represent some truth related to the blog and the blog disappeared, what would my analysis represent?

vocabulary. Since “sharenting” was almost certainly not part of that vocabulary, the databases were likely returning just the articles that use the term in their title or abstract.¹¹

Google Scholar does not specify how its system selects results in response to a search query (*Google Scholar Search Tips*, n.d.), but it presumably searches more than just article titles and abstracts, as my search returned articles where “sharenting” appeared in the full text or list of references. This explains the significant uptick in search results. In addition, Google Scholar appears to house far more records than subscription-based academic databases (Gusenbauer, 2019), though scientists caution that it should not be considered a replacement for such databases (Haddaway et al., 2015; Shultz, 2007). I resisted Google Scholar for a different reason, not wanting to be complicit in Google’s march to become the operating system of everyday life (Zuboff, 2019). Yet the sheer number of results was hard to argue with, so Google Scholar became my primary portal into academic discourse on sharenting.

Just as with the news media search, I saw my next task as one of classifying which articles were relevant. This was before I acknowledged my entanglement with the materials, when I still subordinated wonder beneath rationality. My gut told me whether articles were relevant or not, but my gut was not a sufficient justification. I turned to external markers of relevance: where the article mentioned sharenting, whether the article appeared in a peer-reviewed publication. I knew that clearly delineated inclusion and exclusion criteria belonged to post-positivist projects, but I constantly fought the instinct to create them.

¹¹ I thank Rachel Gammons for helping me through the process of finding relevant sharenting research.

In hindsight, I struggled to escape the gravitational pull of objectivity. Attributing my decisions about which articles were relevant to my years of experience studying this topic, my countless hours of thinking, writing, conversing, ranting, and dreaming about it, or my intimate familiarity with the motivations and aims of this dissertation felt like staking the project in quicksand. Yet this fear of uncertainty is precisely what Law (2004) asks us to abandon, because the world itself is not certain or secure. And if research is a process that exists in the world, not separate from it, then why *would* we expect that research operates any differently?

I revisited the search results, not as objects to evaluate, but as interlocutors. I asked them not, “Are you relevant?” but “Where are you going?” I envisioned myself walking to an academic conference on sharenting and inviting passersby to join me. If an article simply mentioned that sharenting existed but clearly focused on a different topic, such as children’s interactions with digital media or the psychological dimensions of the parent-child relationship, I wished it well and continued on my way. Though we briefly crossed paths, these articles were participating in other conversations. I also attended to the emotional dimensions of my encounters with the search results. When perusing an article produced excitement, frustration, or anger, I took that as a sign that we had something to offer each other and invited the article along. The process of assembling sources became one of listening, not only to myself but also to the articles. We partnered in the research.

Once an article joined my journey, I read it and reviewed its reference list, identifying additional articles that discussed parents’ use of social media. I reviewed the abstracts and full text of the additional articles, again asking them where they were going. Again, if an article was

participating in conversations about how parents use social media to disclose information about children, I invited it along. As such, my collection includes articles that examine sharenting but do not use the term. A Google Alert notified me when new sharenting articles were published, and I stopped including new sources after March 2020. The collection analyzed here includes 88 academic articles from 2009 to 2020.

4.3. Analyzing Source Material

Post-positivist or interpretivist methodologies for qualitative inquiry, such as grounded theory or thematic analysis, tell researchers how to treat their data. Through specific instructions or general guidelines, they promise that following the process will yield a contribution, whether theory or themes. At least that is the aspiration; one of the most important things peer reviewers consider when evaluating a paper is the soundness of its methods. Post-structural and post-qualitative figured worlds make no such promises and offer no such stability. Working against method, or toward method assemblage, is risky. Slow and uncertain, method assemblage asks researchers to take “time and effort to make realities and hold them steady for a moment against a background of flux and indeterminacy” (Law, 2004, p. 10). There’s also the risk of rejection. Peers determine the worth of our research, and if they do not understand our choices nor subscribe to our beliefs, they may not accept our work (Hine, 2005). This is why Chapters 2 and 3 provide so much detail about post-structuralism, discourse, and governmentality. Writing them deepened my own comprehension of these concepts, and I hope that reading them gives the committee and other readers a foundation upon which to understand (and evaluate) my work. I

return to the question of evaluation shortly, but first I explain the two methods that govern my own efforts to make scholarship out of this collection of materials: coding as wonder (MacLure, 2013a) and writing as inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018).

Coding is perhaps the defining activity of qualitative inquiry. It entails some form of systematic review of data, an iterative process where researchers separate data into chunks, label them, and discern meaning from patterns they observe (Saldaña, 2013). This process produces a hierarchy; lower-level codes get merged into higher-level codes until the mass of data is reduced to a few salient takeaways (MacLure, 2013a). MacLure (2013a) contends that “[f]or poststructuralism, coding offends on a number of fronts” (p. 167) Coding again enacts the subject-object divide, positioning the researcher as the agentic subject who makes sense of data, which exist as inert objects that require interpretation to be fully understood. This process leaves little room for considering the ways that data are “*already* coded by language, culture, ideology and the symbolic order” (MacLure, 2013a, p. 170, emphasis in original; see also Gitelman & Jackson, 2013). Coding also distances the researcher from the data, flattening data into categories and condensing them into higher levels of abstraction.

Drawing on Deleuze, MacLure (2013a) offers a different form of coding, one that attends to the affective and embodied experience of developing intimate familiarity with research materials. Here, coding is about thinking as well as feeling, imagining, and I would add, conversing, with data. To code my materials, I read and re-read them, underlining, highlighting, and writing notes, focusing on information related to the three research questions. I observed when my mind crackled with inspiration or my shoulders tightened in frustration. Annotations of

“Yes!” “Sigh” “Huh?” and “!!!” peppered my notes, and these emotional markers informed where I directed my attention. I liken my process of coding to the movement of the subtle knife from novelist Philip Pullman’s (1999) “His Dark Materials” trilogy. That knife possesses the power to cut through the fabric of reality and create portals into other worlds. The knife’s bearer carves these portals by gliding the knife through space until they detect a subtle snag, which they then slice into an opening. The process takes concentration, but also letting go, unifying oneself with the knife. In this research, my eyes serve as the knife, scanning the text until they snag on a word or phrase that resonates with the research questions. Just as the knife interferes with the continuity of physical space, my coding process “interrupt[s] the fluency of the narratives that encode [the fabric of] experience and mak[es] them stutter” (N. S. Rose, 1999b, p. 20).

Eventually, a researcher must move into abstraction, focusing on certain aspects of her source material at the expense of others. This is where the all-knowing researcher as subject usually emerges to impose order onto the jumble of codes and represent what the data means (MacLure, 2013a). Since post-structuralist and post-qualitative research resists this subject-object divide and the premise of representing data’s meaning, for me, abstraction entails linking portions of the source material to the processes of governmentality. I do this by using writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018).

Miller and Rose (2008, p. 30) describe writing as a technical device, a manifestation of the technology of thought. I am not alone when I say that writing for me is thinking (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018; Zinsser, 1988). After my demographics (woman, Indian-American), one of my strongest identity affiliations is with language: I am a writer. Writing is how I make sense of

myself and the world. While certain qualitative methodologies incorporate writing, they prioritize the outputs of writing rather than the process. Ethnographers write field notes and grounded theorists write analytic memos and then parse or code those texts as data. After coding, conventional qualitative research involves various processes to categorize or cluster excerpts of data or codes into patterns, ideas, or themes that are then distilled into findings and written up. Here, writing explains what things mean.

However, in post-structuralist and post-qualitative inquiry, writing questions, surveys, maps, imagines, plays, reflects, celebrates, and mourns with the topic of focus. St. Pierre, also drawing on Deleuze, recounts that when she used writing as a method of analysis, she “wrote my way into particular spaces I could not have occupied by sorting data with a computer program or by analytic induction...I made accidental and fortuitous connections I could not foresee or control” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018, p. 829). Across notebooks, notepads, paper scraps, email drafts, Scrivener pages, and this Microsoft Word document, I wrote and wrote and wrote my way through the materials, attending to both presence and absence—what the materials addressed as well as what they left out. (A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2012; Lather, 1993)

I employed what qualitative theorists Alecia Jackson and Lisa Mazzei (2012) call thinking with theory. They read interviews transcripts through concepts from various post-structural theorists, which they “experienced as having Butler or Derrida or Spivak reading over our shoulder and asking a series of questions” (A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2012, p. 7). The experience was a bit more interior and textual for me, where questions, phrases, or feelings grounded in texts percolated my thoughts as I examined my source materials. I provide

additional detail in the empirical chapters, but overall, I wrote with the concepts of method assemblage, power/knowledge, subjectification, and especially governmentality in mind.

4.4. Evaluating Research Quality

If my processes for assembling and analyzing source material appear made up, I understand. In response, I offer the words of education scholar Elizabeth St. Pierre (2019), who reminds us that three decades ago, researchers also invented (i.e., made up) what is now conventional qualitative methodology. She notes that Foucault “used no preexisting methodology, which he then *applied* in his research. Instead, he made it up as he went” (p. 2, emphasis in original). She argues that post-structural theories and concepts are incommensurable with conventional qualitative methodology because post-structuralism rejects the foundations that underpin this methodology, such as the subject-object divide that separates researcher from data and the representationalist logic that expects research to represent a pre-existing reality. In post-structural and post-qualitative inquiry, the actions that lead to a research product such as a dissertation are guided by the onto-epistemological commitments of the chosen theories or concepts. In other words, concept-as-method (E. St. Pierre, 2014), which in my case, is governmentality-as-method. Post-structural and post-qualitative inquiry “must be invented, created differently each time” (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2019, p. 4).

The question inevitably arises: How is someone supposed to evaluate the quality of such work? This is the specter of validity, which expects research to be systematic. But “systematicity is not thinkable in poststructuralism [nor]...in post qualitative inquiry” (Elizabeth Adams St.

Pierre, 2019, p. 5). Validity is a concept that looks for concordance between the analysis in question and the phenomena to which it refers (Morse, 2018). This makes sense for work that operates within a representationalist logic, where the analysis represents an underlying phenomenon. However, it makes little sense when one eschews representationalism. My analysis does not *reflect* what oversharing or sharenting are in reality; my analysis *produces* a reality of sharenting. A different person who examines the source material will produce another reality. One isn't right and the other wrong—they both exist. Post-qualitative research does not seek “to systematically repeat a preexisting research reprocess to produce a recognizable result but to experiment and create something new and different that might *not* be recognizable in existing structures of intelligibility” (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2019, p. 4, emphasis in original).

Thus, other conceptualizations of validity and rigor, grounded in the particulars of the study in question, are necessary (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2019). From sociologist Laurel Richardson (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2018): Does the work substantively contribute to the understanding of social life? Is it aesthetically pleasing? Does the author attend to their own subjectivity? Does the work move the reader, whether intellectually or emotionally? From sociologist Patti Lather (1993): Does the work grapple with the limits of representation? Does it embrace difference rather than seek coherence? Does it pursue openings rather than pin things down? Does it transgress expectations of research? As a governmentality study, this project should be evaluated against the standards governmentality itself sets forth:

[S]tudies of government offer a perspective which brings into sight a domain of questions to be asked and practices to be analysed. In particular, they seek to interrogate the problems and problematizations through which ‘being’ has been shaped in a thinkable and manageable form, the sites and locales where these

problems formed and the authorities responsible for enunciating upon them, the techniques and devices invented, the modes of authority and subjectification engendered, and the telos of these ambitions and strategies. (N. S. Rose, 1999b, p. 22)

The quality of this research should be determined based on the extent to which it offers perspectives of oversharing and sharenting that align with the criteria Rose outlined above. Since dissertations are supposed to demonstrate an individual's mastery of the research process, I offer two additional criteria: do the methods and resulting analysis align with the onto-epistemological commitments of the project, and does the project contribute something of value? These are the standards to which I hold myself accountable, and I invite readers to do the same.

Chapter 5: Producing the Problem of Parental Overshare

5.1. The Concern of Oversharing

Children, especially young ones, cry, poop, vomit, smile, laugh, and say and do innumerable cute and funny things. They evoke pride, joy, frustration, and rage. But should parents discuss these things on social media? This question motivates STFU, Parents, a popular blog that expanded into other forms of media. The venture, whose name stands for “Shut the fuck up, Parents,” publishes screenshots of content that parents posted on social media and critiqued them. Active from 2009-2017, STFU, Parents discussed oversharing at a time when social media was gaining ubiquity, and many wondered what to make of it. The term “overshare” gained popularity as a reference to the act of disclosing an inappropriate or undesirable amount of detail, especially related to one’s personal life (Hoffmann, 2009; “Overshare, v.,” n.d.).

Academic research has found that social media users perceive overly emotional or banal content as unnecessary, annoying, and/or inappropriate for a place like Facebook, where content is visible to a broad audience and could reflect poorly on the user (Lambert, 2016; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012). Not wanting to see this content from others, users also try to avoid posting it themselves (Kennedy et al., 2016; Lambert, 2016; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012; Uski & Lampinen, 2016; Waterloo et al., 2018; Zhao et al., 2016). When scrolling through social media feeds, users must also navigate tensions between viewing what others post and knowing “too much” information about people, especially weak ties (Lambert, 2016). Some users may take steps to avoid seeing information they don’t want to see, while others may claim that a user’s

decision to post something online gives those in the audience a “*right* to claim the intimate information” of acquaintances (Lambert, 2016, pp. 2570, emphasis in original). News media paints oversharing as problematic because it involves the flow of traditionally private information into a more public realm (Hoffmann, 2009).

While the line between normal and excessive sharing often goes undefined (Uski & Lampinen, 2016), accusations of oversharing typically target social media posts about “sex and romance, intimate relationships, [and] parenthood and reproduction” (Hoffmann, 2009, p. 71). The focus on sexuality and reproduction evokes biopower, or power that seeks to regulate the creation of new life (Foucault, 1984a), which suggests that oversharing may operate as a tool of government. Parents themselves also seek to avoid judgment based on what they post on social media (Toombs et al., 2018). To do so, they may use humor or positivity in their posts (Ammari et al., 2014) or turn to pseudonymous platforms like Reddit or YouBeMom to discuss stigmatized topics (Ammari et al., 2018; Schoenebeck, 2013). Others may embrace “the subversive status of the bad mummy” and “share stories of boredom, frustration, and maternal deficiency” (Orton-Johnson, 2017, p. 2). At the same time, parents are also attuned to concerns about oversharing and seek to avoid posting too many pictures of their children online (P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015) as well as content that might be private or unappealing to their audience (Ammari et al., 2015).

This prior research has identified oversharing as an object of media discourse and something that individual social media users, including parents, are keen to avoid. But how did oversharing become a problem, particularly for parents? In this chapter, I conduct a

governmentality analysis to examine how authority, programs, and technologies link up on STFU, Parents to govern parents' social media conduct. First, I demonstrate how STFU, Parents, and the author behind it, cultivated authority and gained recognition as a type of parenting expert. I explain how STFU, Parents characterizes overshare as any social media content that confronts readers with "leaky bodies" (Shildrick, 1997), or bodies that overstep their boundaries. I demonstrate how STFU, Parents employs the technologies of evidence and anonymity to bring overshare into being. Where STFU, Parents sees impropriety, I see information pulled out of context, which poses broader questions about how social media systems themselves facilitate problematic uses of information.

5.2. Methods: Conducting a Governmentality Analysis of STFU, Parents

My study of overshare uses the analytical technique of governmentality, a Foucauldian-inspired means of examining how authorities intervene in people's lives. Governmentality traces how expertise, manifesting in people, institutions, and discourses, harnesses ideas and materials to regulate social conduct (Miller & Rose, 2008). To conduct my analysis, I engaged with STFU, Parents material in dialogue with governmentality literature, a method known as thinking with theory (A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). I explored the blog's informational pages and press coverage and followed multiple pathways through its posts. I examined the author's list of favorite posts, her annual lists of noteworthy posts, and the blog's most commented posts. I also studied posts in each of the tags created by the author. Beyond the blog, I examined the STFU, Parents book as well as the STFU, Parents' column on the parenting website Mommyish.

I took notes on individual STFU, Parents posts, noting turns of phrase or statements where the blogger identifies things parents should or should not do, the reasons she gives, and the judgments she renders toward those who did or did not behave accordingly. I began noticing ideas that appeared central to STFU, Parents' operation, such as the distinction it draws between blogs and social networking sites, and the distinction it tries to draw between behavior and disclosure. I circulated between STFU, Parents material and governmentality literature, concentrating on how discursive and material elements dynamically defined what STFU, Parents was trying to accomplish, where it directed its attention, and how others responded to it. Through this iterative process, I traced how STFU, Parents harnesses the technologies of evidence and anonymity to problematize representations of "leaky bodies" on social media, and thus governs parents' social media conduct through the program of oversharing.

Before turning to the analysis, I explain how I represent STFU, Parents content in the analysis. The blog posts and Mommyish articles are freely available on the Web, and they contain the screenshots of parents' social media posts. While STFU, Parents takes steps to anonymize these screenshots, something I discuss in Section 5.5.2, the blog's author posted these screenshots without informing the people whose social media content appears in the screenshots. Since these people may not have intended for their social media content to attract visibility beyond their network of connections, I have chosen not to depict or quote the material directly in my analysis, though I do describe some examples. The analysis does include direct quotes of the STFU, Parents commentary, since the blog is geared toward the general public.

5.3. How STFU, Parents Cultivated Authority

Created in March 2009, STFU, Parents describes itself as “a submission-based blog that mocks parent overshare on social networking sites” (Koenig, n.d.-e, para 1). The blog invites people to submit screenshots of parenting-related posts “from Facebook, Twitter or other social networking sites” (Koenig, n.d.-c, para 4), which its author posts along with snarky commentary. While the blog’s first post is a screenshot the author took from her own Facebook newsfeed (Koenig, 2013, p. x), she told *The Atlantic* that “every single submission (since the first day the blog went up) has been sent to me by someone I don’t know” (Doll, 2013, para 12).

STFU, Parents explains that while other humor sites post screenshots with little additional information, this blog “thrives on generating conversation through the author’s commentary under each post” (Koenig, n.d.-a, para 2). The author ran STFU, Parents pseudonymously for three-and-a-half years, going by the initial “B.” In October 2012, she disclosed her identity as 30-year-old Brooklyn-based writer Blair Koenig on the Ricki Lake Show and the New York Post. By then, she said the site received 1.5 million page views per month (Ridley, 2012).

Similar blogs mock other groups of people for the types of information they post online: STFU, Marrieds for couples, STFU, Fertiles for pregnant people, STFU, Believers for religious people, STFU, Curebies for people who advocate cures for autism (rather than accepting autism as a form of neurodivergence), and STFU, Conservatives for people with right-leaning political views. All but STFU, Fertiles are hosted on Tumblr, aligning with the platform’s pre-corporate ownership ethos of irreverence (McCracken et al., 2020). These blogs have not been updated for

five to seven years, and similar blogs, like Get off My Internets (GOMI), AntiBaby, and Asshole Parents, have disappeared from the Web. The other STFU blogs maintain a personal blog aesthetic, with appearances that hew closely to the Tumblr platform default. For its first two years, STFU, Parents also followed the default Tumblr layout, with just a title, stream of posts, and short sidebar providing information about the site (See Figure 5.1). The sidebar included an emblem of a sonogram with a PBR beer can in place of the fetus, followed by the text: “You used to be fun. Now you have a baby. If you’re being driven crazy by your friends’ baby updates every time you check your status feed, please feel free to contribute to this blog.” It included an email address and link to the blog’s Twitter account.

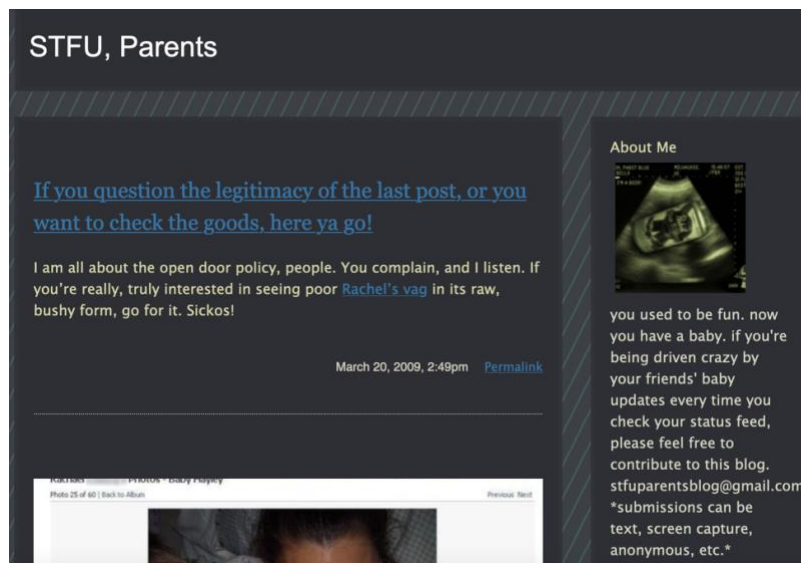


Figure 5.1. Screenshot of STFU, Parents from March 2009. Source: Internet Archive

In June 2011, Koenig released a website redesign that signaled a shift from blog to brand (See Figure 5.2). The default Tumblr URL gave way to the domain name stfuparentsblog.com

(though this stopped functioning in late 2020).¹² The PBR sonogram emblem remains, but the blog’s title appears as a professionally designed logo, with the letters STFU stylized as baby blocks. The site’s format follows standard professional web design, with a navigation bar across the top directing users to pages where they can learn more about the blog, find instructions to submit screenshots, and contact the author. A side navigation menu contains links to a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page, a list of press coverage the blog has received, and an archive of posts.

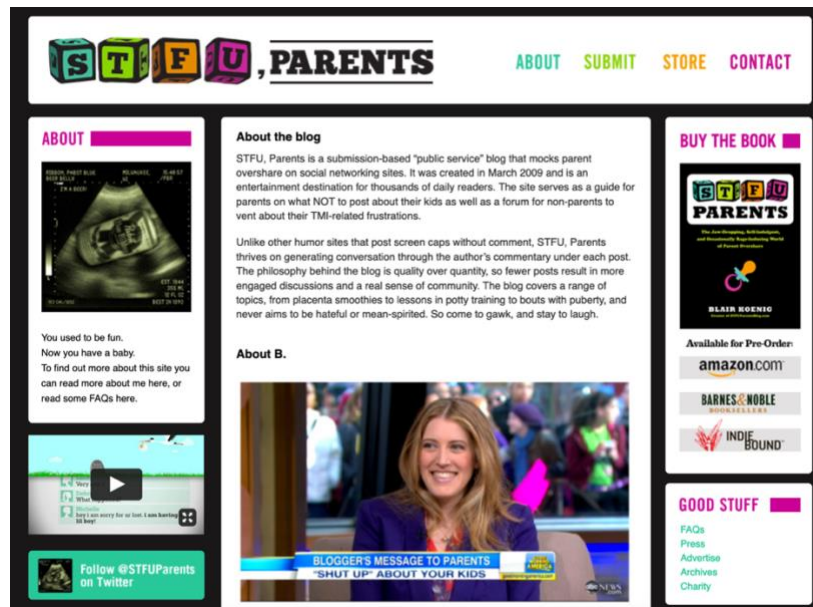


Figure 5.2. Screenshot of the STFU, Parents “About” Page

A link to advertiser guidelines on the side menu and a “Store” button at the top signal the site’s commercial orientation, though the blog does not appear to have started with revenue in

¹² Most of the site’s content remains available at <https://stfuparents.tumblr.com/>, through a lot of the links no longer redirect properly.

mind. In a post announcing the redesign, Koenig (2011) said she began the blog after being laid off from her marketing job and did not expect it to “gain such an amazing audience” (para 5). Given that she was spending “a lot of time each day posting, going through submissions, reading through comments and answering emails,” she decided to incorporate advertising (ibid). STFU, Parents’ advertiser guidelines invite ads on the site as well as sponsored posts (Koenig, n.d.-b). Nearly two years later, Koenig told *The Atlantic* the blog was “the opposite of a cash cow” (Doll, 2013, para 4), suggesting that it did not generate significant revenue. The “Store” button also remains aspirational, as clicking it leads to a “Coming Soon” graphic. Koenig said she planned to sell posters and infographics on the site, create an STFU, Parents app, and launch an STFU, Pet Parents site (Doll, 2013), though none appear to have happened.

That said, STFU, Parents did expand to other media. From 2011-2017, Koenig wrote a weekly column under the STFU, Parents moniker for the parenting website Mommyish. In 2013, she achieved what she called “a blogger’s dream come true” (Koenig, 2013, p. 191) and published a book based on the SFTU, Parents blog through an imprint of Penguin. Posts on the blog tapered off after the book’s publication, and the blog has not been updated since 2014. In its first four years, the blog featured an average of 32 posts per month (median=33); that dropped to an average of 5 per month from 2013 to 2014 (median=3).

Koenig continued to write about parental overshare on Mommyish. Her articles followed the STFU, Parents formula of screenshots and commentary, and the commentary grew more nuanced, incisive, and political over the years. STFU, Parents conversations, which unfolded in the comment sections of the Tumblr blog, shifted to Facebook. Neither the Mommyish column

nor the STFU, Facebook page has been updated since 2017. Koenig continues to post on the STFU, Parents Twitter account, but the content is related to her personal interests rather than STFU, Parents material.

Though STFU, Parents is no longer active as a brand, it attracted attention and achieved notoriety for its commentary on oversharing. In addition to 1.5 million pageviews per month, Koenig reported the blog reached 50,000 people per week (Koenig, n.d.-b). Its Facebook page and Twitter account collectively have nearly 90,000 followers. The site was twice nominated for a Shorty Award, which recognizes social media creators, and it won the parenting industry's Cribbie Award for most entertaining parenting blog in 2012 (Koenig, n.d.-d). Koenig and the blog also appeared in prominent media outlets including *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *The Atlantic*, *The Huffington Post*, *Buzzfeed*, *Vanity Fair*, *Glamour*, *Slate*, *Salon*, *Good Morning America*, *Today*, and CNN (Koenig, n.d.-d).

Despite her sizeable and monetized social media presence, Koenig is not, or rather was not, an influencer. Where influencers gain attention by curating their own lives on social media (Abidin, 2015a), Koenig did so by commenting on how other people, specifically parents, used social media. In this way, she resembles an editor overseeing a magazine. This is also how Koenig characterized STFU, Parents. On the blog's About page, Koenig describes STFU, Parents' purpose as entertainment (Koenig, n.d.-a). But she also bills STFU, Parents as an arbiter of oversharing, saying that it "serves as a guide for parents on what NOT to post about their kids

as well as a forum for non-parents to vent about their TMI [too much information]-related frustrations” (Koenig, n.d.-a, para 1).

Historically, the genre of the women’s magazine attuned women to socially acceptable mores related to fashion, courtship, and housekeeping (McRobbie, 2013). Mainstream media attention toward mothering in particular has intensified in recent decades (Douglas & Michaels, 2005), and blogs and social media offer additional avenues for governing mothers (McRobbie, 2013). McRobbie (2013) asks whether these forms of media can function as “dividing practices” (p. 129), marking certain forms of knowledge inappropriate for a middle-class readership and removing it from their view. The concept of dividing practices comes from Foucault (Dreyfus et al., 1983, p. 208) and refers to the intellectual and spatial practices that mark certain people as diseased or deviant and isolate them in specific places like psychiatric hospitals. McRobbie suggests that media dividing practices operate on class and ethnic lines, setting expectations for middle-class readers and planting aspirations in the minds of low-income and non-white women. The figure of the editor becomes “the person who both exemplifies and oversees this field of feminine taste and decorum” (McRobbie, 2013, p. 129).

STFU, Parents can be understood as a as a dividing practice, with a twist. It marks certain forms of knowledge, materialized through screenshots of social media posts, as inappropriate. But rather than shut them away, it drags them into the limelight. And Koenig, as editor, defines a field of decorum by spotlighting examples of its absence. Where women’s media typically engender the “intoxicating pleasures of fashion, fabric, and home-making” (McRobbie, 2013, p.

129), STFU, Parents evokes lurid curiosity and Schadenfreude at the vicissitudes of raising young children.

McRobbie (2013) proposes “visual media governmentality” as a tool to examine the formation of maternal femininity through women’s media. She focuses on the images of appropriate motherhood that such media advance. By approaching STFU, Parents as a space of visual media governmentality, I demonstrate how the seemingly straightforward concept of “oversharing” works to regulate the conduct of parents, particularly mothers. Oversharing, as developed by STFU, Parents, is inherently visual, realized through the technologies of evidence, produced through screenshots and anonymity, facilitated via editing software. The next two sections explain the programs and technologies of STFU, Parents.

5.4. Oversharing as a Program of Leaky Bodies

On STFU, Parents’s FAQ page, Koenig says she started the blog after “some friends in my Facebook feed were driving me crazy by documenting the minutiae of their lives as new parents...I figured if I was experiencing that frustration, others might be, too” (Koenig, n.d.-e, para 7). This positions parents as the source of a problem, their behavior a type of aggravation. Koenig specifies the problem in the introduction to the STFU, Parents book: “Now, instead of being vaguely aware of my friends’ lives, I was intensely aware of their babies’, thanks to a never-ending stream of status updates and photos” (Koenig, 2013, p. x). Beyond its suggestion that social media is not a place for minutiae, this viewpoint espouses an essentialist view of identity, where parents and children are separate individuals, and a person’s social media

presence is supposed to center on them, not their children. It also prioritizes the social role of friend over that of parent, at least on social media.

STFU, Parents began with six posts on March 13, 2009. The first post is a screenshot of a woman's Facebook status announcing that she had a great conversation with her doula and spent far too much money on organic baby gear, with no title or additional commentary. Koenig said the post was from a friend who told Koenig to "leave [the post] up so she could tell everyone she inspired the blog" (Doll, 2013, para 12). The post has dozens of comments from people who read the entire blog and thanked the author for it. The next three posts—expressions of annoyance at a sonogram post and child's bedtime update as well as laughter in response to a comment about an infant smiling at a Phish song—contain minimal commentary from the blog's author.

By the fifth and sixth posts, Koenig struck the format and tone that would come to define STFU, Parents: a screenshot of a social media post, commentary that makes fun of the information in the screenshot and/or the people who posted that information online, and an implication or explanation of what marks it as overshare. The fifth post displays a screenshot of three videos that a user appeared to have posted simultaneously on Facebook of a baby bathing and eating. Koenig makes a sarcastic comment about not wanting "to miss out on your kid's bath." She adds that the title of the third video, "chocolate finger painting" "doesn't sit well" with her, which a commenter inferred to reference playing with poop. Koenig then suggests that the user's content is too banal for Facebook, writing "Hint: 53 seconds of your kid's bath feels like an eternity to everyone else."

For the first two years, blog posts featured one screenshot and commentary. Around the time of the website redesign in June 2011, Koenig began collating similar screenshots and publishing them together. Some posts parallel her Mommyish column. For example, in one Mommyish article, Koenig includes screenshots depicting five things expectant women should not post about on Facebook: morning sickness, ways to induce labor, crowning, labor and birth photos, and “the brutal truth,” such as feeling like your “butt explodes.” A corresponding blog post discusses the same topic but features different material. The blog post mocks women for posting pictures of several pregnancy tests, pictures of their baby bumps, information about their sex drive, announcements about live-streaming their birth, and statements they accidentally became pregnant. Both the Mommyish article and the STFU, Parents blog post adopt a humorous tone and frame themselves as advice, but the blog post exhibits a more acerbic attitude toward the people who posted the information in the screenshots.

The blog organizes posts into categories, called tags on Tumblr. Some tags refer to blog features Koenig created. In “Comment of the Week” posts, she awards the “pimp chalice,” an image of a gold, bedazzled chalice, to a particularly funny comment. In “Links Round Up” posts, she lists links to parent-related articles. However, most tags refer to post content, such as pregnancy and birth (“Bun in the Oven”), urination and defecation (“Bathroom Behavior”), and other bodily functions and products (“Gross Out Factor”). Posts about parents complaining appear in the “Woe is Mom” and “Wambulance” tags, while those about parents fighting with others via social media status updates are called “Mama Drama.” Self-righteous posts about

parenting bear the tag “Sanctimommy,” referring to sanctimonious mothers, and posts with examples of several women doing this together are labeled “POB,” or “packs of bitches.”

Examples of parents sharing extremely detailed status updates about their activities are called “Story Hour,” while those littered with misspellings or other grammar issues are labeled “Language Butchery.” “Trends” includes examples of patterns that Koenig observes, such as posts where parents tell anyone frustrated about child-related content to unfriend or otherwise disconnect from them on social media. Posts about examples of parents indulging their children appear in “Spoiled Brats.” Posts about parental overshare tied to the news, such as women expressing gratitude of a safer world for their children after the death of Osama bin Laden, are called “Current Events” Posts tagged “WTF Of The Day” include examples of parental overshare that Koenig finds particularly egregious, such a father of a baby girl who asked on Facebook if anyone had thought about a man one day ejaculating on their daughter’s face. In contrast, “Mom’s Gold Star” includes examples of what Koenig wants to see from parents on social media—wry witty comments where parents make light of the vicissitudes of raising children or call out other parents on their oversharing.

The most popular tag is “Holidays,” which includes posts related to every major American holiday from Martin Luther King, Jr. Day through New Year’s. Mother’s and Father’s Days are predictably prominent, but the blog is especially enthusiastic about Halloween, which Koenig commemorates with a string of “Fright Fest” posts. These are the scariest, which for STFU, Parents typically means the grossest, posts that Koenig receives. She introduced the blog’s first Halloween with a screenshot of a photo posted on Facebook of a young boy playing

with a used tampon. Over the years, Fright Fest included screenshots of many of the things listed in section 5.4.1. Several of these blog categories—“Bathroom Behavior,” “Gross-Out Factor,” “Holidays,” “Mama Drama,” “Mommyjacking,” “Pregnancy and Labor,” “Sanctimommy,” “Story Hour,” and “Woe is Mom”—have dedicated chapters in the *STFU, Parents* book. But where the blog offers what Koenig describes as “daily instances of laughter, wacky stuff I see, and a sprinkling of trends,...the book is a totally cohesive manual, an organized little etiquette guide” (Doll, 2013).

For Koenig, oversharing represents a failure to abide by the norms of decorum. McRobbie (2013) argues that media visualize maternal failure through “the abject body of the ‘single mother’ and in the bodies of her untidy children or ‘brood’” (p. 122). This overweight, poorly dressed mother signifies “inadequate life planning,” and exemplifies what political theorist Wendy Brown (2015) terms “mismanaged lives.” *STFU, Parents* visualizes parental failure through the repulsive screenshot of the oversharing mother. However, I argue that the concern with oversharing is less the mismanaged life and more the leaky body.

Post-structuralist feminist theorist Margrit Shildrick (1997) developed the concept of “leaky bodies” as a way to trouble binaries like male/female. Historically, the category of female also entailed being “not-male,” meaning that neither category exists as wholly separate from the other. Indeterminate boundaries leave open the possibility that one category may “leak” into the other. Materially speaking, bodies coded as female menstruate, birth, and breastfeed. In other words, they “leak” in ways distinct from bodies coded as male. The term leak signifies improper

disclosure of sensitive information (e.g., leaking documents for political purposes) as well as outflows of waste (e.g., the colloquial reference to urination as “taking a leak”) (“Leak, n.,” n.d.).

Like oversharing, the concept of leak invokes notions of impropriety. Given this, I argue that STFU, Parents treats oversharing as anything that confronts people with leaky bodies. This operates materially, as in reminders that human bodies pee, poop, birth, and nurse, and conceptually, as in the blurred boundaries between the identities of parent and child. As a program of government, oversharing seeks to keep any reminders of those leaky bodies hidden from view. Materially speaking, STFU, Parents focuses on two manifestations of leaky bodies. It criticizes social media posts that discuss or depict leaks of bodily fluid or tissue. It also criticizes social media posts that demonstrate leaks of affect, ranging from saccharine sentimentality to seething rage.

A warning that the next section discusses waste and other things that emanate from bodies. If you are eating, have recently eaten, or are planning to eat soon, consider skipping it.

5.4.1. Gross Bodies

According to STFU, Parents, overshare is the posting of gross stuff, that is, information or images related to waste, fluid, and tissue that come out of the body’s orifices, on social media. The screenshots of STFU, Parents depict examples of this overshare, with the graphic parts of images edited out, and Koenig advises parents to not post these kinds of things online. Gross overshare commonly involves children’s excretory functions. STFU, Parents features screenshots about:

- The fact that a child, typically a baby, has urinated or defecated;
- Diaper changing and excretory material escaping (or exploding out of) the diaper;
- The food that children's waste resembles;
- Children excreting waste in bathtubs and on carpets, lawns, and stores;
- Children excreting waste directly onto a parent, including their face;
- Children playing with their waste products, including smearing it onto themselves or others (there is an infamous "poop skating" post);
- Parents extracting waste from a child's body by hand; and
- Potty training, including pictures of children on the toilet.

Screenshots on STFU, Parents also discuss or depict children's vomit (including spit-up going into a parent's mouth), breastmilk, drool, snot, eye crust, blood (depicted on something like a bedsheet or a child's injured foot), or organs (as in photos of a child's removed appendix or tonsils).

Beyond children, oversharing encompasses pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding. STFU, Parents includes screenshots discussing or depicting pregnancy tests, baby bumps, a hard uterus or a soft cervix, mucus plugs, the taste of amniotic fluid, details about dilation and contractions during labor, any image or video of the baby's emergence from the birth canal or where blood, fluids, pubic hair, or the vulva are visible. Additional screenshots talk about or show ectopic pregnancy, c-section staples, the umbilical cord (as well as the stump that remains on the infant), and many forms of placenta.

The placenta is infamous on STFU, Parents, with screenshots discussing or depicting the placenta following the afterbirth, freezing and planting it, making art from it, or consuming it as a sandwich, smoothie, jerky, or raw in a bowl. Koenig frequently references a post about placenta sushi, which she removed when the person who originally posted the information depicted in the screenshot requested it (Section 5.5.3 discusses Koenig’s post removal policy). Beyond birth, STFU, Parents criticizes screenshots about leaking or discolored breastmilk, adults consuming breastmilk, and other non-feeding applications of breastmilk. Finally, STFU, Parents considers nudity a form of overshare. This includes images of a child nursing on an uncovered breast and those that depict a child’s genitals.

STFU, Parents’ considers these posts gross, and Koenig believes people do not want to see or hear about this kind of information as they scroll through social media. While she recognizes parents, especially those with young children, constantly confront bodily waste and other fluids and tissues and “*doo* what [they’ve] got to *doo*,” she asserts that “talking about it online, no matter how many of [their] friends with young children are going through the same thing, is WRONG” (Koenig, 2013, pp. 30–31, emphasis in original).

5.4.2. Affective Bodies

To STFU, Parents, overshare also includes gratuitous displays of sentiment on social media, from mawkishness to fury. Screenshots that STFU, Parents deems overly sentimental depict ultrasound images, statements about how much a parent wants to spend time with their child, or what Koenig considers odd levels of preoccupation with a child (including a screenshot

of a woman naming her fetus “Squishy” and another referring to her son as her “boyfriend”). Screenshots on the negative side of the emotional spectrum show parents complaining about being tired, chastising others for not meeting a new baby or attending a child’s birthday party, and ranting obscenely at (or threatening physical violence toward) neighbors, delivery people, or workers who make noise during a child’s nap or otherwise inconvenience the parent.

STFU, Parents particularly criticizes sanctimonious expressions from parents. Screenshots in the “sanctimommy” category depict Facebook users complimenting their own parenting, expressing entitlement to special treatment in restaurants or access to family parking spaces, touting natural birth, breastfeeding, and other parenting-related practices, offering unsolicited advice about car seats and other child safety measures, diminishing the perspectives of non-parents, or imploring others to have children. Koenig acknowledges the gendered nature of her categories of overshare: “[m]ommyjacking, sanctimommy, mompetition, momedy, momarazzi, and documom.” She says that while “the absolute last thing I want to do is ‘shame’ women more than men for sharing their parenting experiences on social media,” most of the screenshots she receives depict women. However, she affirms that she’s seen several examples of fathers engaging in the same overly sentimental, exasperated, and sanctimonious behavior that she chronicles about mothers, and a few STFU, Parents blog posts and Mommyish articles feature examples of sanctidaddies and daddyjackers (especially around Father’s Day).

The concept of “mommyjacking” is central to Koenig’s construction of oversharing. The term is a play on the word “hijacking” and refers to parents, primarily mothers, responding to current events or other people’s social media posts with unrelated information about their

children or about parenting more generally. STFU, Parents discusses seemingly endless variations of this hijacking:

- Non-sequitur-jacking: A person posts about having seven pounds of strawberries and a commenter responds that their grandson is seven pounds.
- Holidayjacking: A person wishes people a happy St. Patrick's Day by announcing that their daughter's poop is green.
- Milestonejacking: A person posts about an engagement, wedding, or anniversary and a commenter responds with the age of their own children.
- Tragedyjacking: A person posts about sending prayers to the victims of the Boston Marathon bombing and then explains how they love their child's sports team.
- Deathjacking: A person announces someone's death and a commenter mentions that they've just enjoyed a quiet, kid-free day.

While mommyjacking is not always overly emotional, Koenig's frustration is that it conveys the sentiment that a child is the center of a parent's world. Koenig contends that the kinds of posts discussed in this section reflect poorly on the parents who post them, suggesting these parents have no life beyond their child. Her problem with these kinds of posts is that emotion and child-centeredness leak out of the parent, onto Facebook, and then onto the feeds of other Facebook users. She believes the purpose of social media is to "provide relatable entertainment for friends and family" (Koenig, 2013, p. 167), not to confront people with the gross or affective leaks that emanate from bodies. But how do such leaks come to be realized as

oversharing? The following section explains the technologies through which the program of oversharing comes to life.

5.5. Harnessing the Technologies of Evidence and Anonymity

By identifying certain social media posts as examples of oversharing, STFU, Parents seeks to govern parents' behavior. That said, programs like oversharing require technologies to realize them materially. As explained in Section 5.4, the blog's posts follow a formula of displaying a screenshot of a social media post deemed oversharing with sarcastic commentary and an explanation of what's "wrong" with the post. This formula worked, in the sense that it attracted attention from other internet users and various media outlets, thanks to two technologies: evidence and anonymity.

5.5.1. Producing Evidence of Oversharing through Screenshots

STFU, Parents operates based on screenshots other people submit. For the blog's first two years, a sidebar encouraged people to submit material for the blog via email, specifying that "submissions can be text, screen capture, anonymous, etc." (See Figure 5.1). Turning again to the blog's initial posts, the first post displays a screenshot Koenig says she took from her own Facebook feed (Koenig, 2013, p. x). The screenshot itself is tightly cropped, displaying only three lines of text, followed by a timestamp and "Comment" and "Like" links. The screenshot bears no overt link to Facebook, but the font, layout, and signature blue color of the "Comment" and "Like" links are recognizable to anyone who used the site in its early days. The syntax of the

status update it depicts—a (feminine) first name followed by a description of the person’s activities—also aligns with the tone of Facebook at that time, which encouraged users to post what they were doing or what was on their mind (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

The blog’s second post is a slightly blurry screenshot of a sonogram which sits in the middle of a black rectangle. The upper right of the image appears to contain white text, but it is unreadable. In contrast to the first STFU, Parents post, it is not clear where this screenshot came from. The accompanying commentary refers to “your profile picture,” but the screenshot does not contain any recognizable signals connecting it to Facebook or another social network site. The third and fourth posts lack screenshots, but they do contain titles, which is where the blogger’s commentary appears. The body of each blog post includes a sentence in quotes that appears to be typed directly into the blog’s platform. The quotation marks denote the words as belonging to someone other than the blog’s author. The syntax of these two sentences resembles the voice of the status update in the first STFU, Parents post—a first name followed by description of activities or thoughts. This suggests the text comes from Facebook status updates, though nothing in the posts confirm this.

The fifth post returns to including screenshots. Its commentary draws on the content as well as the metadata displayed in the screenshot. The top of the screenshot depicts the text “[Name] uploaded new videos.” Below the text is a column of three images of a baby, the familiar “play” appearing on each to signal that it is a video. To the right of each image appears the title of each video, the name of the user who posted the video, the duration of the video, and when it was posted online, in this case, “four hours ago.” As mentioned in the previous section,

the blogger's commentary makes fun of the video titles and their duration, suggesting that a minute-long video of a child's bath is too banal for Facebook. Again, nothing overtly links the screenshot to Facebook, but the layout, font, and colors follow Facebook's signature look.

The blog's June 2011 redesign included a specific page for submission instructions, which invites people to submit "Screen caps from Facebook, Twitter or other social networking sites" (Koenig, n.d.-c, para 4). It specifies what file formats are acceptable, as Koenig says her "computer doesn't get along with other formats," (para 1) and includes a link to instructions for anyone who does not know how to take a screenshot on a computer. Koenig invites people to submit "news links and links to crazy shit on the internet" as well as "stuff that makes you happy" (para 4) She also includes a list of what not to submit, including files that do not follow the formatting guidelines, information from other sites that resemble STFU, Parents, "Screen caps of forum discussions or of comments sections from other sites (OK, just sent the really good ones," and "Links to personal blogs or mommy blogs. That ain't my territory" (para 5). Through these guidelines, Koenig demarcates where oversharing, at least defined by STFU, Parents, occurs: on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter but not personal blogs.

A comment thread from a 2012 post encapsulated how the STFU, Parents community also embraced this distinction between social networking sites and blogs. In the post, Koenig discusses what she calls the "feel free to delete me" trend, where parents tell "their friends to delete/unfriend/hide/unsubscribe from them if they don't like seeing baby pics." One commenter (whom I'll call "A") pushes back against the assumption that people who post on Facebook should tailor their updates to the desires of their Facebook Friends. "A" explains that Facebook is

one's "own page," and people who don't want to see someone's information on their News Feed can hide or unfriend that person.

Another commenter (whom I'll call "C") resists the characterization of Facebook as someone's own space. "C" accepts Facebook as a space for sharing but said that because people's Facebook posts appear on their Friends' News Feeds, Facebook users have the responsibility to not overshare and clog their friends' feeds. "C" suggests that Flickr streams or personal blogs could be considered someone's "own" space because people actively choose to go to those sites and view the information posted there. "C" describes this as reason why STFU, Parents accepts submissions from Facebook but not from blogs – because blogs are more "private" spaces where users can post whatever they want, as often as they want. Koenig expresses a similar sentiment in an interview with *The Atlantic*, saying. "I see social media as a big public space, and they [other people] see it as a bunch of individual private spaces, like I'm coming into their room and telling them what to do. I see it more like etiquette, and they think I've invaded them" (Doll, 2013, para 11).

While social media is now broadly accepted as a form of networked public (boyd, 2011), the distinction that STFU, Parents draws between social network sites and blogs is interesting because it goes beyond the question of who can access the content. Typically, anyone can access a blog by typing in the correct URL. Blog content is usually indexed in search engines, which means people can also encounter blog content through search results. In contrast, Facebook and other social network sites often provide privacy settings that enable users to restrict access to their profiles and content. And while blog operators can password-protect their blogs and restrict

search engines from indexing their content, from an access-control perspective, social network sites tend to be more limited than blogs.

The screenshot is so important for STFU, Parents because the content that STFU, Parents mocks is not widely accessible. While the hyperlink defines blog culture (Helmond, 2013), hyperlinks don't work for STFU, Parents because oversharing, at least in the way STFU, Parents defines it, is not visible via a hyperlink. The screenshot provides the necessary evidence to support Koenig's claim that oversharing is a problem that parents need to learn how to address. That said, documenting other people's personal information and displaying it more publicly for the purposes of mockery it is not generally considered appropriate behavior. Koenig's use of anonymity presents an attempt to make this work more palatable.

5.5.2. Employing Anonymity to Mitigate Risk

Anonymity on STFU, Parents operates on three levels: the blog's author, the blog's submitters, and the users who appear in the blog's screenshots. As mentioned in Section 5.3, the blog's author operated pseudonymously for three-and-a-half years, going by "B." She explains that after starting the blog, "there wasn't really a reason to reveal who I am because it seemed so peripheral to the content. The blog isn't about me; it's about parents who overshare and say ridiculous things on social media. I wasn't even sure how people would respond, or what the blog was going to be about" (Koenig, 2012b, para 2). In connection with the book's publication, Koenig coordinated an identity reveal with The Ricki Lake Show, inviting STFU, Parents

readers willing to share their own oversharing stories to join her in the segment (Koenig, 2012a, 2012b; Ridley, 2012).

While the blog author's identity went from pseudonymous to known, the identity of those who contribute screenshots to the blog moved in the opposite direction. The first two blog posts on STFU, Parents did not attribute the screenshots to anyone, though in the book Koenig (2013) says she took the first one. Attribution began in the third post, with the words "(submitted by [first name])" appearing beneath the material. The fifth post included the first name of the submitter and hyperlinked to the submitter's own Tumblr blog. This continued for a few posts, including one submission attributed to STFU, Marrieds. Subsequent posts display a mix of no attribution, attribution by first name, and attribution listed as "anonymous." After the blog's first few months, the submissions are generally attributed to "Anonymous." Based on snapshots from the Internet Archive, from the beginning, the blog offered anonymity to those who submitted material, though it's unclear whether anonymity was the default. It appeared to be the default by 2011, as the site's redesign included a page for submission instructions, which stated "Everyone who submits to the blog will be kept Anonymous. I promise" (Koenig, n.d.-c, para 3).

The third level of anonymity on STFU, Parents concerns the people who are represented in the screenshots that the blog mocks. Screenshots depict social media status updates, likes, and comments, which often include such identifying information as people's names or pictures. Since its first posts, STFU, Parents has consistently edited screenshots so that only first names or first initials of users are visible. Koenig may have redacted names as a protective measure, as suggested in a 2010 comment thread. There, the person who submitted the screenshot mocked in

the STFU, Parents blog post disclosed the name of the child of the Facebook user who appeared in the screenshot. Another commentor expressed disbelief, and the submitter said that while they would post a link or screenshot as evidence, they also did not want to disclose the Facebook user's identity, in case doing so would result in the Facebook user experiencing harassment. Koenig agreed, asking the submitter not to post names or screenshots. She said that while she "would have LOVED to keep their first names in this post, I don't want to risk it."

The blog has been less consistent in editing photographs. The first post to include images of a person was the one discussed in the previous section, whose screenshot showed a user uploading three videos of a baby onto Facebook. The baby's face is visible in all three images in the screenshot; the only editing redacted the last name of the Facebook user who posted the videos. Similarly, the first STFU, Parents post with a screenshot that includes a Facebook profile picture redacted the Facebook user's last name but not the image. The profile picture is a close-up of a baby wearing a hat and sucking on a pacifier. The picture is directly related to the commentary, as STFU, Parents mocks the user for displaying her baby instead of her own face in her profile picture.

The first edited photo appeared a week after the blog started. The screenshot depicts a woman in a hospital bed holding a newborn, whom she appears to have delivered very recently. STFU, Parents deems the photo overshare because the woman's vulva is visible at the bottom of the image. The photo has been edited to add a cartoon star over the woman's vulva and a cartoon mustache to the baby's face. In her commentary, Koenig remarks that she "threw the baby that 'stache, cuz he didn't sign up for this shit." She also wrote that while readers "may think posting

this picture is tacky... [s]ome people would consider this picture to be the visual representation of what this blog is about. In other words, it's a 'money shot,' and you good folks needn't be victims of censorship. I'm not here to be your mom. I'm just here to make fun of them."

It's possible Koenig did not initially include the image in the blog post, as 40 minutes later, she published an STFU, Parents post titled, "If you question the legitimacy of the last post, or you want to check the goods, here ya go!" and says that if readers are "really, truly interested in seeing poor [Name's] vag in its raw, bushy form, go for it. Sickos!" (See Figure 5.1.) This sentence contains a hyperlink to the previous post, which depicts the edited image. It's unclear if Koenig had at some point posted the unedited image, which is what this sentence suggests.

STFU, Parents did link to unedited images in other posts, though Koenig's comments suggest she eventually moved away from this. One STFU, Parents post discusses a Facebook photo depicting a naked newborn with his legs spread-eagled. The baby's face is blacked out and his genitals are covered with a cartoon whale. Koenig's commentary provides a link to a Flickr page where the image can be "scarily viewed unedited." One year later, a commenter remarked that the Flickr link was no longer worked. Koenig responded that she had "replaced it a couple times and it continued to get taken down...c'est la vie! I don't really feel like linking to unedited photos anyway :)"

By the blog's second month, profile photos are usually edited out. Sometimes the entire profile picture is blocked out, while other times only the face or eyes are painted over. This variation may stem from fact that in some cases, submitters edit the screenshots before sending them to Koenig, and in other cases, Koenig edits them herself. Editing of other photographs in

screenshots remained inconsistent. For instance, the faces are blacked out in one April 2009 post depicting a couple with their hands around the woman's exposed pregnant belly, but children's faces in two other pictures posted later that month were visible. A few months into the blog, most posts with images were edited to obscure faces.

The blog's submission guidelines, which appeared with its June 2011 redesign, state that Koenig "cover[s] all last names, faces and private information" from posts (Koenig, n.d.-c, para 2). She asks submitters, "If you edit your submission yourself, please don't block out full names (first and last) without loosely explaining who's who in your email. Otherwise things get pretty confusing. When in doubt, just send your submission unedited and I'll take it from there" (Koenig, n.d.-c, para 2). Koenig applies similar editing policies to the screenshots she in her Mommyish articles, redacting last names and obscuring profile pictures. In photographs, she blocks out faces of adults and children, and occasionally those of babies.

The screenshots in the *STFU, Parents* book went further to mask the identities of users. The book does not depict screenshots per se, as the screenshots have been stylized into the formatting of the book to represent Facebook posts (and one Tweet). The square profile picture that appears next to status updates is replaced with an avatar, and the status updates display only first names. While much of the book's material is new, it also reproduces some of the most popular posts from the blog. A comparison shows that the book's examples changed users' names, and in some cases the gender of the children they mentioned. Unlike the blog, the book (perhaps mercifully) does not include any photographs posted by social media users.

According to Koenig, STFU, Parents exists to mock parental overshare (Koenig, n.d.). In this framing, overshare exists, and Koenig simply curates examples of it. This reflects the common interpretation of reality as existing “out there,” independent of our actions (Law, 2004). However, a governmentality analysis disrupts this frame. I argue that overshare does not pre-exist STFU, Parents; rather, STFU, Parents brings overshare into being. The acts of taking a screenshot to produce evidence, using editing software to redact names or faces, and posting the results on a blog crystalize information that once flowed on a Timeline or News Feed into specimens deemed to reflect a broader phenomenon. These acts resonated enough to attract an online audience and the attention of conventional media. But, as the following section explains, they were not always appreciated.

5.5.3. Removal of STFU, Parents Blog Posts

STFU, Parents does not discuss the issue of consent, but by all indications, users do not consent to their social media posts being captured in screenshots and posted to STFU, Parents. In an FAQ that also appeared with the site’s June 2011 redesign, Koenig acknowledges that she’s “happy to remove anything the original poster asks me to remove,” and states that her policy was to remove a post “by the end of the next business day” (Koenig, n.d.-e, para 14). “Original poster” refers to the user who posted the content depicted in the screenshot.

While Koenig did remove posts, she did not always appear to treat requestors’ wishes respectfully. In one STFU, Parents post, Koenig says a user “nicely asked” Koenig to remove a post containing a screenshot of the user’s social media content. Koenig said she would do so

later that evening. Koenig encouraged STFU, Parents readers to “check it [the post] while you can!” and included a hyperlink to the STFU, Parents post. In another case, a woman emailed Koenig after Koenig had removed a post featuring the woman. Koenig not only posted screenshots of the email text (with the sender’s email address redacted), but also posted text from the woman’s original Facebook update. In other words, Koenig directed attention to people’s social media content even after those people expressed a desire for the post to be removed.

In another case, Koenig decided to remove an STFU, Parents post mocking a woman who posted on Facebook about wanting to serve a neighbor’s dogs “antifreeze salad” because their barking interrupted her baby’s nap. In a blog post explaining her decision, Koenig said an STFU, Parents commenter had recognized the woman and posted the woman’s blog URL in the STFU, Parents comments. An STFU, Parents commenter then posted “nasty remarks” on the woman’s blog. Koenig called “hijacking someone’s blog” inappropriate and stated that she would remove comments from the STFU, Parents blog that disclosed personal information of the people depicted in the screenshots.

The woman in question responded to Koenig in the comments, saying she had contacted Tumblr and her attorney. Koenig wrote back, saying the woman “was taking things a bit far.” Koenig said the person who commented on the woman’s blog was being “thoughtless” but that the woman had also been thoughtless in her antifreeze salad comment. Koenig asserted that everyone’s comments were “in jest.” Koenig said that while she regretted not removing the STFU, Parents comments that identified the woman, the woman did put her own name on her blog. With this, Koenig appeared to implicitly blame the woman for receiving negative

comments. The woman responded to say she had security outside her home after receiving hundreds of emails and voice mails containing death threats to her and her family. Other STFU, Parents commenters dismissed the woman's concerns, suggesting she was lying about the security and the death threats to get attention.

In an interview with *The Atlantic*, Koenig called STFU, Parents tongue-in-cheek, framing the blog as a source of harmless fun (Doll, 2012). Yet the blog's own description suggests otherwise. The first line of the blog's About page says it "mocks parent overshare," and its last line invites readers to "come to gawk, and stay to laugh" (Koenig, n.d.-a, para 1-2). Although this explicitly signals ridicule as the blog's *modus operandi*, Koenig denies malicious intent: the About section's penultimate line says the blog "never aims to be hateful or mean-spirited" (Koenig, n.d.-a, para 2). This statement, and Koenig's broader characterizations of STFU, Parents, show little regard for the harmful effects of a blog dedicated to mocking parents.

5.6. Oversharing as More Than A Matter of Etiquette

STFU, Parents forges the program of oversharing based on screenshots of social media posts that Koenig receives from anonymous submitters. Koenig publishes modified versions of these screenshots without informing the people who originally posted the information on social media. Furthermore, she lampoons those people and their social media updates, attacks that are perpetuated and exacerbated in the blog comments. STFU, Parents minimizes this harm by classifying its work as humor or entertainment while at the same time justifying it as a "public

service” (Koenig, n.d.-a, para 1). Koenig uses the phrase in jest, but readers and commenters have thanked her and said they or people they know take STFU, Parents as advice.

Beyond the blog’s successes and harms, my concern is that STFU, Parents relies on violations of contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2010). It separates information from its original context and uses it in a way that the people who disclose the information likely did not anticipate and may not appreciate. This differentiates STFU, Parents from other snarky forums like YouBeMom and the subreddit r/RoastMe, where people submit their own information for commentary (Allison et al., 2019; Schoenebeck, 2013).

Koenig complains about being confronted with evidence of people’s leaky bodies, but *she was never meant to see the information in the first place*. Koenig justifies her commentary by speaking for those social media users who feel frustrated by the parenting-related information they see. This frustration stems from the way social media collapse contacts from various contexts in one’s life into one ostensible place (boyd, 2008). As a result, social media are widely regarded as networked publics, where individuals present themselves to an (imagined) audience (boyd, 2008, 2011; Litt, 2012; Marwick & boyd, 2011). Oversharing is thus a concern that users are not giving the audience what they want.

How did oversharing become a problem? In short, the world became more open and connected. Social media platforms like Facebook, through their architecture of status updates, user connections, and algorithmically generated flows like the News Feed, confront people with more information than they previously received. Where a new parent might have invited their partner into the bathroom to admire their child’s first poop or phoned a grandparent to complain

about a diaper explosion, some people now depict or discuss such experiences on Facebook. The News Feed computationally serves that content to users, some who may welcome such information and many who likely would not have gotten such detail otherwise.

People adopt different strategies for managing this context collapse. They may avoid discussing certain things on social media (Marwick & boyd, 2011), disclose only what they feel is palatable to all of their connections (Hogan, 2010), disguise their content so only certain people may recognize its meaning (Marwick & boyd, 2014), calibrate their posts to display a balance of topics and an authentic identity (Marwick & boyd, 2011), create separate accounts (boyd, 2008; Xiao et al., 2020), or adjust their privacy settings (Stutzman et al., 2011; Vitak, 2012). These findings are important, but they focus on responses to context collapse at the level of the individual user. This reinforces the idea that problems related to context collapse, such as oversharing, are also individual responsibilities. Social media users, including mothers, appear to have internalized this responsibility, as they express desires to avoid oversharing (Buehler, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2016; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015; Raun, 2017; Vitak & Kim, 2014).

But what if social media users resist the performer/audience framing entirely? The metaphor of performance has dominated social media research for disciplinary and conceptual reasons. Disciplinarily, researchers in media and communication were among the first to study social media, with some using concepts related to broadcast or mass media to do so (e.g., Litt, 2012). Conceptually, social media research draws heavily on sociologist Erving Goffman's (1959) foundational work on self-presentation, which contends that people represent themselves differently in frontstage (or more public) contexts and backstage (or more private) contexts.

However, an exchange between two STFU, Parents commentors suggests that social media users themselves may not approach social media using the performance metaphor.

Let's return to the comment thread discussed in Section 5.5.1 where "A" and "C" debate the public or private nature of blogs and social media sites. Amidst the exchange, "A" said they believe the onus rests on individual users to post content that their audience will find interesting. "C" resists, saying they do not conceptualize their Facebook friends as an audience to whom they are feeding content. "C" says their Facebook Friends aren't paying "C," so "C" questions why they bear any responsibility to cater to their interests. "A" responds by differentiating between regular sharing and oversharing, saying the latter clogs people's feeds and is better suited for a blog. "C" resists again, suggesting that "A" is legislating what people should post and making a value judgment that people are better for posting less about their children. In this interaction, "C" pushes back against the conceptualization of social media as a space where users exist to serve audiences.

STFU, Parents adopts a narrow definition of social media as a space for entertainment and quite explicitly judges what kind of parenting-related content should be appropriate for social media. In the process, Koenig attracted a sizeable community of readers and commenters, published her views through more traditional media avenues, and came to be regarded as an expert on the topic of parents and social media. The program at the core of STFU, Parents' success—oversharing—is in STFU, Parents' view a problem of individuals not knowing proper social media etiquette. However, if the concern is that parenting-related content clogs people's social media feeds, why aren't the social media platforms, or at the very least elements such as

algorithms that power those feeds, also scrutinized? For instance, algorithms structure information in social media interfaces in ways that obscure people's ability to know who sees what (Bernstein et al., 2013; Eslami et al., 2015).

In contextual integrity terms, the information recipient is unclear, as is the informational context. People use Facebook and other social media to document personal experiences, maintain relationships with others, access news, be entertained, and more. Social media feeds occupy myriad contexts, which can vary by person and even by interaction. This makes it difficult for a person to discern what norms govern the flow of their information, suggesting that social media platforms by design may complicate efforts to respect contextual integrity (Nissenbaum, 2010). This can present problems from the interpersonal to societal levels, with one person feeling hurt by someone's social media post to entire swaths of people believing hoaxes about vaccines based on social media posts. But this struggle to respect the contextual integrity of information also poses onto-epistemological problems when one approaches worlds as fundamentally relational. For instance, in many indigenous belief systems, certain forms of knowledge can only belong to certain people or exist in certain circumstances (Law, 2004). The information cannot be separated from its context, its worldview, regardless of any Silicon Valley company's desire to make the world's information universally accessible. Grappling with tensions of algorithmically mediated communication requires engaging with the politics of information, rather than policing individual behavior.

In the next chapter, I explain how news discourse harnesses risk to further legitimize parents' social media conduct as worthy of judgment.

Chapter 6: Harnessing Risk to Turn Sharenting into a Problem

6.1. What is Sharenting?

In a *New York Times* op-ed titled, “The Problem with ‘Sharenting,’” reporter Anya Kamenetz (2019) argues that parents who post information about children on social media threaten children’s privacy, make children’s information available to data brokers or child predators, and commodify childhood. The article suggests that while concerns about technology and children tend to focus on “troubling videos and excessive screen time...the real threat is adults’ disregard for their children’s rights and best interests” (Kamenetz, 2019).

The portrayal of parents’ social media use as risky permeates attitudes toward “sharenting,” a portmanteau of the words “share” and “parenting.” Media coverage and academic research on parents and social media has focused on what parents do online and what benefits and concerns their activities pose. As *The New York Times* headline encapsulates, this work typically presumes sharenting to be problematic. But when going online and using social media are inseparable from everyday life, what differentiates sharenting from parenting? At what point does parenting become sharenting? Is sharenting so distinct from the typical activities of parenting that it merits a separate term?

In this chapter, I critically examine how American news media constructs parents’ use of social media as a problem. Using the analytical practice of governmentality (Dean, 1999; Miller & Rose, 2008; N. Rose et al., 2006), I show how news media discourse portrays children’s presence online as a form of risk and holds parents responsible for mitigating that risk. I explain

how sharenting discourse relies on hierarchized binaries such as public/private and physical/virtual and ignores the fact that the concerns it expresses affect more than just children. I argue that sharenting expresses what I call a rationality of *potentiality risk*, which is a response to fears that data-driven processes preclude people from achieving their “best selves.” This form of risk remains inchoate but could cohere as society increasingly deems it appropriate to judge people based on their social media use. As sharenting continues to attract media and academic attention, I encourage this work to go beyond its focus on the actions of individual parents and attend to the broader sociotechnical conditions that give rise to data-related concerns.

6.2. Governmentality and Risk

Governmentality is an analytical practice for examining how authorities intervene in people’s lives. French philosopher Michel Foucault offered governmentality as a means for tracing how power works to legitimize knowledge and direct people to behave in certain ways (Miller & Rose, 2008). Governmentality contends that risk is a specific way of organizing reality to make it calculable and thus manageable (Dean, 1999; N. Rose et al., 2006). In other words, risk is not an objective entity that exists in the world, but something that authorities create using knowledge. For example, insurance harnesses probability and statistics to calculate the chance of some event, such as accidental death, and distributes the event’s costs across a given population. Insurance does not prevent those events, nor does it compensate for the suffering they cause. It renders something incalculable—loss of life—into calculable form—monetary compensation. The money does not compensate for the suffering itself but provides an indemnity against the

loss of a specific form of capital—what that person would have produced if they had continued living (Dean, 1999; Ewald, 1991).

Insurance is a form of rationality that collectivizes risk by spreading certain costs across a group of people. Other forms of risk rationality include epidemiological risk, related to health outcomes, and case management risk, related to outcomes deemed socially undesirable (e.g., long-term unemployment). These forms of risk do not exist in the abstract; they come into being through materials and ideas. For insurance to work, an insurer needs to compute the chance of something occurring and the price of a premium or a claim. This requires materials, such as statistical tables (now embedded in software), as well as concepts, such as probability, to make sense out of the calculations. Epidemiological risk rationality attempts to mitigate the consequences of certain health outcomes through practices such as health screenings, vaccination efforts, and sanitation regimes underpinned by theories of public health (Dean, 1999). In governmentality, the materials and practices that calculate and manage risk are called technologies, and the concepts or theories that justify such efforts are called programs (Miller & Rose, 2008; N. Rose et al., 2006).

The calculative rationality that drives governmentalized risk can involve quantitative or qualitative efforts. Insurance and epidemiological calculations primarily quantify risk, but case management calculations can operate through qualitative techniques like case interviews and behavioral observations to identify whether someone is “at risk” of something like committing a crime or experiencing poverty. Many forms of risk rationality exist beyond the three discussed here. The goal of governmentality research is not to devise a definitive or exhaustive typology of

risk, but to study how risk as a technique binds different programs and technologies and constructs certain ways of being as more or less desirable and appropriate. The focus is not risk itself but what gets labeled risky, and by whom. These moves attend to risk as a moral and political technology (Dean, 1999; Ewald, 1991).

6.3. Social Media Use Becomes Sharenting

Sharenting is more than a news buzzword. The concept has also taken root in academic research, pushing scholarship on parents' social media conduct into discourses of risk and threat. Scholars note that parents have used websites, blogs, and online discussion forums since the 1990s to access information, exchange advice, and find support related to child-rearing (Lupton et al., 2016). As platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube gained ubiquity throughout the 2000s, parents incorporated social media into their everyday lives (Duggan et al., 2015; Lupton et al., 2016). When parents interact online, they do more than access information and support; they also enact their parental identities. The questions they ask, the experiences they recount, and the status updates and photos they post reflect how they embody their roles as parents (Gibson & Hanson, 2013; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015; Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017). This almost always involves disclosing information about their children, a tension parents recognize and grapple with (Ammari et al., 2015; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017).

Researchers have examined parents' social media disclosures about children as a matter of privacy, whether as a dichotomy of privacy and openness (Chalklen & Anderson, 2017), or as the responsibility a parent feels to steward their child's privacy by being judicious about what

they post online about the child (P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). Others suggest that the proliferation of data about children, including data generated when parents post about children on social media, constitutes a form of surveillance (Leaver, 2017) and is changing what it means to be a citizen (Barassi, 2018; Mascheroni, 2018). When a team of computer scientists discerned personally identifiable information from Facebook photos of children, parents' social media conduct became a type of threat that puts children at risk (Minkus et al., 2015). Legal scholarship portrays sharenting as a conflict between a parent's right to free expression and a child's right to privacy. Analyses of American, British, and EU law conclude that legal protections for parental expression outweigh those for children's privacy (Bessant, 2018; Lievens & Vander Maelen, 2019; Steinberg, 2017).

As such, researchers argue that parents, as well as teachers and others who might post about children on social media, need to be educated about the risk their activity poses to children (Autenrieth, 2018; Cino & Vandini, 2020; Steinberg, 2017). Portraying social media use as risky moves research in a normative direction, framing social media as something negative. For instance, one scholar suggests that since parents experience "wide latitude" to post about children "with almost unfettered control," they have a "moral obligation to act with appropriate discretion and with full regard for the child's safety and well-being" (Steinberg, 2017, p. 882). Such statements portray social media as inherently dangerous and parents as wholly responsible for any negative consequences their children might experience. The notion that sharenting constitutes a problem is increasingly treated as a fact in academic scholarship. My analysis of

news media discourse on sharenting empirically traces one way the claim that sharenting is problematic is acquiring the veneer of truth.

6.4. Methods: Assembling and Analyzing News Media Discourse

In early 2018, I searched the NexisUni database for news articles mentioning the words, “parent(s) posting pictures of children online,” including variants of common words (“photo” or “picture,” “child” or “baby,” “internet” or “online).” I focused on photo posting since parents tend to post more multimedia content after they have children (Morris, 2014). To manage the scope, I limited the search to English-language results from U.S.-based newspapers, blogs, magazines, and online publications. I chose not to use “sharenting” as a search term because I wanted to include journalistic coverage about this topic dating back to the time that social media platforms were gaining mainstream popularity. For this reason, the search included articles dating back to 2006, the year Facebook opened for general public use (Carolyn, 2006).

I manually reviewed the nearly 4,300 search results, identifying 535 results related to parents’ use of social media. From these, I read each article and removed 164 duplicates as well as 142 articles that simply stated that parents post about children online, with no elaboration, leaving 229 articles about parents’ use of social media. These articles referenced an additional 14 news articles about parents and social media use, which I also included in the analysis, for a final collection of 243 news articles. Aligning with governmentality’s epistemological underpinnings, this collection constitutes a field of media discourse, not a dataset of news articles. The aim of a

governmentality analysis is to examine how discourse works to regulate conduct, not to infer what a sample represents of a broader population.

To study this discursive field, I adopted the method of thinking with theory, in which researchers examine their source material as a dialogue with a particular theoretical concept (A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). Once I developed fluency in governmentality, I read each article and took notes on what type of social media activity it discussed, what purpose it attached to those activities, what concerns it raised, what interventions or solutions it posed, who it held responsible for addressing the concerns, and what types of expertise or authority it invoked. I then moved between the news articles and literature on governmentality, risk, and sharenting, writing notes about the way sharenting discourse harnessed binaries such as parent/child, offline/online, public/private to pose certain activities as risky and to advocate interventions to address the risk. I also attended to the ways that sharenting discourses resisted or troubled those interventions. Through this iterative, immersive process, I traced how sharenting discourses in news media position children's online presence as a form of risk that parents must manage. This approach differs from conventional qualitative methods that use coding to abstract categories, themes, or findings from a set of data. Coding aims to represent what data means. In contrast, thinking with theory aims to explain what discourses do (A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2012).

6.5. The Discursive Construction of Sharenting

This section explains how sharenting discourse characterizes parents and their social media use. I first describe the field of discourse and identify what activities it considers

sharenting. I then explain how discourse links sharenting with a child's digital identity and expresses concerns about the consequences of this digital presence. I detail how discourse attributes these concerns to conditions of information flows. I also demonstrate how discourse holds parents largely responsible for mitigating these concerns. Finally, I review perspectives in sharenting discourse that resist elements of the dominant framing.

The discursive field I analyzed includes news stories and blog posts, columns, opinion and commentary pieces, editorials, advice columns, and letters to the editor. They come from an assortment of news organizations, including national and major metropolitan outlets, magazines, local news, college newspapers, and specialized media, such as outlets focused on Hollywood or the Jewish community. Within this field, the activity of posting pictures and other information about children online takes many shapes. This activity announces pregnancies and births and depicts everyday moments and special occasions with children, such as birthday parties or the first day of school. It shows what children do at summer camp. It chronicles a child's medical condition or death and makes social, cultural, or political points related to parenting, such as a parent's experience with a transgender child. It presents artistic photographs of children and responds to social media campaigns. It punishes, shames, and ridicules children, as when parents post pictures of children holding signs saying they misbehaved.

Posting pictures and information about children online, in its myriad forms, fulfills equally varied functions. It documents memories and shares them with family and friends. It strengthens existing bonds of community and creates new ones. It helps parents cope with difficult circumstances. When information goes viral, it attracts attention from celebrities and the

broader public, sometimes generating income for parents. The descriptions of parents' online activities in this discursive field align with academic research on parents and social media use. This consistency suggests a relatively stable understanding of the activity that sharenting discourse seeks to govern. But how does sharenting discourse govern parents' social media activities? It problematizes children's presence online as a form of risk and then holds parents responsible for mitigating that risk.

6.5.1 Digital Identity and Risk

Sharenting is potent thanks to the concept of a "digital identity," also called a digital persona, profile, legacy, trail, footprint, or presence. Two statistics repeatedly appear in the news articles to illustrate the prevalence of children's digital identities: a security company survey finding that 92 percent of American children have an online presence by age two, and another survey finding that parents post about 1,000 photos of children by the time they reach age five. The notion of a "digital identity" positions the internet as a distinct space of existence. These statistics characterize the internet as a space that, for better or worse, includes children.

Sharenting discourse contends that posting photos and stories about children creates this identity for them without giving children a choice or a voice in the matter. A children's media nonprofit writes, "posting photos of your kids creates a digital footprint—a kind of electronic paper trail—that forms their identities in a world they haven't chosen to enter." A columnist says "some [parents] blog without boundaries, posting pictures, revealing endless details about children who don't get a say in how much of their childhood they want public and on the

record.” In other articles, these sentiments appear within the frame of consent, as in children not consenting to the creation of digital identities or not being old enough to do so.

Sharenting discourse portrays the creation of a digital identity as a choice, one best left to the child. The head of an online safety nonprofit writes “there’s something to be said for letting children decide, at an appropriate age, how public they want to be, rather than parents making that decision for them when they’re very young.” In response to a question about children and digital privacy, a parent writes that she doesn’t feel comfortable posting about her child online and wonders if her daughter will grow up to be someone who prefers not to use social media. Another parent who does not post pictures of his infant daughter tells a journalist that the decision is “a simple matter of respect and trust for your child. I want her to make the decisions about her online footprint and understand the consequences of what happens if you are not thoughtful about your internet presence in our current world. I won’t make that choice for her.”

The reference to “consequences” explains why sharenting discourse treats the existence of a digital identity as problematic. While this discourse approaches sharenting as “so new, none of us know what is going to happen,” it focuses on negative effects, both experienced and imagined. It positions the internet as a risky space for children. Journalists write of the “safety concerns that come with posting about [children]” online. One calls YouTube a “potentially dangerous place for kids” on account of “a whole industry of YouTube creators who attract clicks” by remixing popular cartoons to show grotesque violence or sexual activity.

A prominent concern in sharenting discourse is the potential of physical, psychological, or emotional harm. A “stranger,” “predator,” or “pedophile” might see a picture of a child, glean

enough identifying information to locate the child, and abduct and/or abuse them. Someone might take a picture of a child and post it elsewhere, passing the child off as their own, discussing the image in a sexually suggestive way, or using the image in advertising. Children might feel embarrassed or humiliated when they see what parents post about them online, or others might bully or harass children based on what parents post. Posting could also disrupt children's identity development. While sharenting discourse largely discusses the possibility of these harms occurring, some articles mention actual examples. Parents whose family photos are taken and posted on other social media sites describe feeling "violated" and "unnerve[ed]." A blogger whose family photo appeared in a Czech grocery ad calls the experience "both a little flattering and a little creepy." Children also express discomfort related to videos their parents posted online. The boy who appeared in the viral "Charlie bit my finger" video tells a journalist he finds it "scary" when people say they recognize him, adding that "it feels like they're spying." A teenager tells a journalist that one of her eighth-grade classmates was laughed at in class when another student played YouTube videos the girl's mother had posted of her singing as a child.

Another concern is that sharenting might foreclose children's future opportunities. College admissions officers and employers might judge applicants based on information parents posted about them during childhood. Others might use identifying information about children to commit identity theft, which could affect a child's future financial well-being. And facial recognition technology could link a child's data traces, as one technology commentator explains, "preventing [children] from any hope of future anonymity...robbing [children] of a digital adulthood that's free of bias and presupposition." Again, these discussions concerned the

potential for negative consequences, except for one article whose writer said one mom blogger she follows “inadvertently got her 6-year-old kicked out of school for openly complaining about its administration on her website.”

Sharenting discourse also expresses concern for children’s privacy. It invokes privacy as something children “deserve” or possess a “right” to, and as something that others, especially parents, must “protect,” “allow,” or “respect.” By posting about children online, parents “sacrifice[e] our children’s confidentiality and dignity” and “pierce,” “infringe,” “compromise,” “violate,” “remove,” or “do away with” children’s privacy. One academic researcher tells a journalist that sharenting “could be really threatening and harmful and really affect the sense of invading the private space that young people really need in order to develop their identities.”

6.5.2. Digital Information and Parental Responsibility

Sharenting discourse attributes concerns of harm and loss of future opportunities and privacy to the persistence, visibility, and lack of control over information when it goes online. Online, information “live[s] forever;” it “doesn’t go away” and is “very hard if not impossible to remove.” As one writer summarizes, “What goes online stays online. You are leaving a permanent record out there for everyone to see and Google.” Others write that digital footprints are “highly visible to other people” and photos and status updates “intended for a select few are now spread out over the Web for everyone.” One parent says children grow up with “countless ‘witnesses’...thanks to technology.” Another writer adds that parents’ posts may “expos[e] [children’s] issues to the world at large.” And once information is available online, parents

cannot control what happens to it. One parent describes searching her children's names on Google and being:

[S]urprised at the number of images of them that popped up—one even posted to a blog I had no idea about. It was a sobering reminder of how quickly information is disseminated these days and how it can easily slip from our ability to control it.

A children's media nonprofit writes, "once you post a photo online, you lose control over it. Someone could easily copy the photo, tag it, save it, or otherwise use it—and you might never know." A technology commentator says "[o]nce you post and tag your child, she becomes subject to an array of databases over which you have little control." The question of control extends to the act of posting itself; several letters to advice columnists come from parents expressing frustration about relatives or friends posting pictures of their children online when the parents do not want them to.

While sharenting discourse acknowledges that internet companies can shape information flows and laws can regulate information practices, it largely holds parents responsible for managing sharenting concerns. One writer framed this responsibility in terms of etiquette, saying, "we need to be mindful and respectful of our children online, just as we hope they will be of us when they enter the digital fray." The head of an online safety nonprofit portrays a parent's responsibility to "protect your child's 'digital footprint'" as a matter of "being a good role model." A researcher explains that studies of sharenting "can empower parents to make well-informed decisions that benefit their children, their family and society generally."

Sharenting discourse discusses a variety of social and technical measures parents can take to mitigate the risks of sharenting. Parents may choose not to post any pictures or information about their children or avoid posting certain kinds of content (e.g., photos that depict bath or toilet activities, children in bathing suits or other forms of undress, throwing tantrums, or anything “embarrassing”). Writers implore parents who do post pictures of children to “think before you post.” A child psychologist tells parents to “[i]magine for a moment how your child will react as [they] get older and read what has been written about [them] throughout [their] childhood.” A parent blogger says that before she writes a post, she thinks, “What would happen if someone Googled this five years from now,” and if she has concerns, she doesn’t write the post. Similarly, parents should remember that children’s preferences regarding their parents’ posting will likely change over time.

Parents should involve their children in the process, primarily by asking children’s permission before posting something or by removing posted information at a child’s request. Some parents acknowledge the cost that accompanies this. One prominent parent blogger whose child asked the woman to stop writing about her agreed to her child’s wish and says, “I guess maybe I am censored to some extent.” Another parent tells a journalist she “had to beg her daughter to let her post a video” of her child, saying that she felt “almost policed” by her daughter. If parents want to post pictures that include other people’s children, they should get permission from those children’s parents. Parents should also communicate their sharing preferences to others. If relatives, friends, or babysitters post pictures against parents’ wishes, then parents should request they remove the picture.

When it comes to parents' own sharing, sharenting discourse offers several tactics to reduce a child's identifiability and restrict access to photos and information about children. Identification-related tactics include using the child's first name, not using the child's name at all, or using a pseudonym for the child, not showing a child's face in images, not tagging the child or other people in images, not posting the child's address, and disabling smartphone features that embed location data into images. Access-related tactics include limiting social media contacts (i.e., only be Facebook Friend with people one knows), adjusting social media privacy settings to restrict who can see what one posts, or using password-protected services that require others to log in to see photos. Sharenting discourse frames these practices as "common sense," rendering them self-evident or obvious steps for parents to take. This appeal to common sense contains normative implications: parents who fail to take these steps appear negligent or "bad" parents.

Parents who do post may encounter judgment for the act of posting as well as for the content of their posts. Parents who post details about their children's lives may appear to be overly preoccupied with their children, unnecessarily "broadcast[ing]" information about them in the pursuit of "likes" or external validation. Writers also describe cases of parents facing criticism for pictures or videos of various experiences, including children bathing or kissing a parent on the lips, a child's enthusiastic response to receiving a doll of a different race, children throwing flour around a living room, children posing on train tracks, an infant water-skiing, a child fighting with a housecat, and parents shaming children for bad behavior. The critiques

suggested a parent's irresponsibility, whether by letting their child do something negative or harmful or by putting the material online.

6.5.3. Resistance to Dominant Portrayals of Sharenting

Sharenting discourse is not a monolith; it includes perspectives that resist the dominant framing of sharenting as a risk from which parents must protect their children. In the wake of concerns that sharenting compromises children's privacy, one writer suggests, "[i]n a world with privacy constantly under attack maybe it's better to raise kids in public than try to hide them away. That way at least they know what they're up against." An influencer father contends that since sensitive information about people, such as their address, political affiliation, and the price they paid for their home, are available online, "there is no real privacy...in the digital world."

Others resist the risk framing and challenge the focus on concerns. A parent blogger points out that strangers see children's faces when they go out in the physical world. Online safety and parenting experts emphasize the extremely low chance of a stranger abducting or abusing a child after seeing a parent's posts. Journalists also suggest that the chances of anything happening as a result of a specific image are slim. A parent blogger who posts pictures of her daughter suggested that posting itself is not problematic, telling a journalist that "Hundreds of kids die in swimming pools ever year, but we don't shut down all the pools... We teach kids how to swim." Another blogger, who tells a journalist she thinks about the implications before she posts, adds that she has written about her toddler's tantrums and potty training because "those are typical toddler experiences." Writers also note the benefits that accompany social media use,

especially stronger community bonds. Some also resist the idea that parents are to blame when information is misused. A parent blogger who suffered harassment after posting about the race of children's dolls says, "Posting something on the internet isn't giving permission to everyone else to use it." While some legal scholars suggest that material posted online is "fair game" for critique, others say that such harassment is a form of attack, and people who post information online should not be blamed for it.

6.6. Connecting Sharenting and Datafication

In the preceding section, I explained how news media discourse constructs sharenting as a risky activity that parents should mitigate. In this section, I refute common assumptions that underpin sharenting discourse and point out that the concerns that sharenting discourse expresses affect more than just children. I then argue that sharenting expresses a distinct risk rationality, that of potentiality risk. This rationality responds to social concerns about activities that may thwart an individual from becoming their "best self," the mission toward which neoliberal societies conscript their members. Potentiality risk is still coalescing into an avenue of government, which means there is ample opportunity to resist its formation and to expand examinations of sharenting toward broader concerns of platforms and society.

6.6.1. Sharenting Concerns as Datafication Concerns

Sharenting discourse relies on spatial metaphors of the internet as a distinct zone of activity. It also appeals to conceptual distinctions between family life as private and the internet

as public. Sharenting discourse contends that the act of posting about children on social media moves information from one zone to another—from the private, offline family to the public, online internet. It portrays the internet as a space where information is persistent, visible, and difficult to control, often universalizing these characteristics as permanent and worldwide. Such a totalizing temporality and scale increases the chance of information being misused, with negative consequences for children’s well-being. Since “society finds it difficult to accept any degree of risk [to children] above zero” (S. Livingstone, 2013, p. 24), the existence of a child’s digital identity becomes a matter of online safety.

Scholars have long resisted the assumptions that underpin sharenting discourse. While the American culture in which this study is grounded treats children as immature and innocent beings, these are perceptions adults impose on children (Jenkins, 1998). Children represent the means through which a population perpetuates its physical existence as well as its social and cultural ideals. It is not enough for children to survive; they must also become productive citizens, aligning with the neoliberal rationality that governs society more broadly (N. S. Rose, 1999a). Threats to children appear graver than those to adults because of beliefs that children, and childhood itself, are precious and require protection (S. Jackson & Scott, 1999). Media technologies raise suspicion because they appear to undermine parental influence and expose children to domains such as sexuality, considered antithetical to childhood (Banet-Weiser, 2004; S. Jackson & Scott, 1999). Debates about children and media, now occurring under the umbrella of online safety, “do not so much concern the internet as societal conceptions of childhood” (S. Livingstone, 2013, p. 19). Sharenting discourse, by appealing to the need to protect children

from harm, makes it difficult to discuss the implications of social media use outside the perspective of risk.

Sharenting discourse takes issue with what it perceives as parents bringing their children to a digital, public space. This ignores the fact that children, and families more broadly, already exist in such spaces. Despite a widespread belief that the family resides beyond the gaze or reach of outsiders, state and economic actors have long intervened in family activities, through philanthropy, legal, and judicial means, making family matters public matters (Coontz, 2000; N. S. Rose, 1999a; Solove, 2008). And the physical/virtual distinction separates atoms from bits even though they are inextricably intertwined (D. J. Haraway, 1991; S. V. Scott & Orlikowski, 2014; Suchman, 2012). Sharenting discourse's reliance on dichotomies of public/private and physical/virtual render the problem one of placement, suggesting that representations of children do not belong in public, digital spaces. The preferred solution becomes obvious—"don't put children in those spaces"—and alternatives become matters of safety—"if you must post, do so carefully." This discourages exploration of other approaches to address concerns.

The worries expressed by sharenting discourse—that information posted online might sacrifice privacy, be misused, and result in harm—are understandable and well-founded. Digital ecosystems afford persistence and visibility (boyd, 2011), and they alter information flows in ways that weaken control and implicate privacy (Nissenbaum, 2010). But children are not the only ones affected by these challenges. Indeed, these concerns stem from the logic that propels platforms like social media and search engines (van Dijck & Poell, 2013). Such platforms convert information into data, store that data, and connect it, to other people and also to

advertisers, data brokers, and other third parties (boyd, 2011; van Dijck & Poell, 2013).

Sharenting discourse worries that a Facebook Friend you barely know will see a picture of your child, that a college admissions officer will reject your child's application based on an embarrassing story you posted, that a deviant will steal a picture you post and upload it to a child pornography forum. The actions that lead to these negative consequences—scrolling through a news feed, typing a query into a search engine, or doing an image search—are everyday actions, and they are not unique to information about children. These concerns pertain to anxiety over the force of datafication, or the transmuting of everyday life into data that strengthens the power of social media platforms (Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

Social media platforms quantify information on various dimensions and use algorithms to determine what information to show in response to a given action. The complexity of these processes and the scale at which they occur mean that even those who design these algorithms cannot always explain how they make a given determination (Vaidhyanathan, 2018). We don't, and perhaps can't, know why someone sees a piece of information, but we nonetheless suffer the consequences of it—leaving us feeling exposed. Even though adults and children are subject to such exposure, the next section explains why it is no accident that sharenting discourse attends only to children.

6.6.2. The Emergence of Potentiality Risk

Sharenting discourse appeals to the specialness of childhood and the innocence of children, which mark children as beings that require utmost protection (S. Jackson & Scott,

1999; Jenkins, 1998). Why such protection? Because children embody the future. Feminist scholar Claudia Castañeda (2002) opens her book on the figuration of the child by identifying “an assumption so apparently self-evident that it seems almost impossible to imagine an alternative: that the child is an adult in the making” (p. 1). We see children not for what they are, but for what they will become. In other words, we see future-adults. Yet, because the future is unknowable, invoking the child beckons not certainty, but potential. To amend the earlier statement, we see children not for what they are, but for what they *might* become. Hovering over what children might become is the specter of what they might *not* become. Adults, particularly parents, bear responsibility to keep children on the path toward realizing their potential, toward becoming what they *ought* to be.

Child development is one avenue through which the process of keeping children on track operates (Castañeda, 2002; N. S. Rose, 1999a). The developmental perspective sees children as beings whose growth follows a predictable trajectory and whose progress adults can calculate, monitor, evaluate, and judge. If a child does not appear to be developing ‘normally,’ adults look for a reason, often diagnosing some kind of condition and prescribing some form of therapeutic intervention. If adults deem a child to have crossed into a threshold of incapacitation, the child can remain under the authority of a designated authority even after their chronological age marks them as adults.¹³ Child development harnesses scientific, psychological, behavioral, medical, and

¹³ #FreeBritney

legal discourses to manage children, rendering childhood “the most intensively governed sector of personal existence” (N. S. Rose, 1999a, p. 123).

The figure of the child and the program of child development are so tightly coiled that questions about how sharenting might affect a child’s psychological development make intuitive sense. These questions inquire if sharenting might lead a child astray, animating that specter of what the child might not become. In one of the articles analyzed in this study, the head of a children’s media nonprofit writes, “As we deliberate over what and where to share those precious photos and videos of our children, it’s important that we remember our choices could have wide-ranging and unforeseen consequences now and in years to come.”

Legal scholar Brian Simpson (2018) argues that sharenting “is not actually a concern with [children’s] rights in childhood, but with their future rights and reputation as an adult” (p. 84). He argues that if today’s children eventually look back on their parents’ posts with resentment, or if a college admissions officer rejects an applicant based on parents’ posts from years ago, it is the future adult that suffers the consequences, not today’s child. I agree that worries about education and employment pertain to the future adult more than the child. But sharenting discourse also expresses concerns that sharenting might cause physical, emotional, or psychological harm to the child and that it compromises children’s privacy. Sharenting discourse does not suggest these consequences only manifest after a child reaches the age of majority. As such, sharenting discourse addresses the rights of the future child as well as the future adult. I contend that what matters here is less the distinction between child and adult and more the boundary between present and future.

The figure of the child invokes potentiality; the child is an entity in the making (Castañeda, 2002). Sharenting discourse is persuasive because it appeals to the fear that something—in this case, a parent creating a child’s digital identity—might thwart a child from reaching or achieving their potential. I argue that sharenting discourse embodies a distinct form of risk rationality, which I call “potentiality risk.” This risk rationality responds to fears of datafication, specifically the anxiety that when sociotechnical systems render experience into data, “algorithm-based decisions in all domains of social life will determine our life chances” (Popescu & Baruh, 2017, p. 313). Life chances refers to sociologist Max Weber’s theory about how “living conditions, life experiences, and available services...determine the fate of a group” (Popescu & Baruh, 2017, p. 313). Algorithmic decision-making processes are often inscrutable, which makes it hard for people to know what they should do to maximize benefit and minimize harm (Popescu & Baruh, 2017). In this line of thinking, datafication is alarming because it challenges people’s agency, eroding their ability to chart their own life path.

But given that so much of the world exists beyond any one person’s control, why is the prospect of not being able to chart one’s life path so troubling? Because neoliberal society “obliges people to be free,” to exercise “choice, autonomy, self-responsibility, and to maximize one’s life as a kind of enterprise” (N. Rose et al., 2006, p. 91). Society expects people “to conduct themselves responsibly, to account for their own lives and their vicissitudes” (N. Rose et al., 2006, p. 90). This freedom empowers people to chart their own lives, and datafication threatens this freedom.

As discussed in section 6.2, risk in the governmentality sense is a way of organizing reality that makes the world amenable to control (Dean, 1999; N. Rose et al., 2006). Potentiality risk is a rationality that evaluates certain actions based on the chance that they might prevent someone from becoming their “best self.” It does not quantify these chances the way that insurance or epidemiological risk do. Instead, it appeals to values like safety, privacy, and well-being, or markers of the “good life,” such as a college education and a job, and treats actions that might reduce one’s chances of achieving them as risky.

Recall that risk rationalities come into being through programs and technologies. Programs are the ideas that drive or justify the process of government, and technologies are the materials through which the process operates. Insurance risk governs through the program of probability and the technology of statistical analysis. I argue that potentiality risk operates through the program of sharenting but that the technologies of potentiality risk remain inchoate. Technologies produce evidence of some form, which experts then evaluate and use to prescribe some intervention. In clinical risk, a physician might conduct a blood test, use the results to diagnose a patient’s condition, and prescribe medication to alleviate it. In case management risk, a social worker might observe a family for a month, assess any danger to a child, and determine whether to move a child into foster care. As these examples show, the evidence can be quantitative or qualitative. Often, the key to a risk rationality operating as an effective form of government, meaning that it successfully regulates conduct, is standardization. The physician can compare one person’s cholesterol levels to population norms, and the social worker can look for a specific pattern of behavior that research has linked to child endangerment.

Sharenting, at least as it appears in the field of news media discourse analyzed in this chapter, lacks methods for evaluating evidence and prescribing interventions. However, if sharenting continues to attract expert attention, these technologies may evolve, and the stakes for parents could get higher. Two examples from the collection of news articles show how sharenting could be taken up in the rationality of case management that governs child protective services. One article describes a case where a woman posted a picture online of her husband comforting their one-year-old son in the shower when the boy had salmonella. A viewer reported the woman to the state's child safety department, and the woman was charged with child neglect for this photo and others, though the charges were found to be unsubstantiated. The woman said the experience made her hesitate to post family photos online.

Another article described a case of a two-month-old baby becoming brain dead after her sleeping father rolled over the baby. Authorities considered the incident an accident, but the writer called the baby's mother "grieving but online-obsessed" for posting "detailed updates on her MySpace page and other Web sites." The writer explained that while the woman did not respond to a phone call, saying "her lawyer told her not to speak with the media...she apparently feels no such restrictions online, where she's posted extensive updates and responded to those who offer support." The family may have struggled—the article opens by describing the family's trash-strewn apartment and rotten food in its warm refrigerator—but the writer equates the "condition of the apartment and the mother's fixation on the Internet" as equally "troubling." The article appeared in 2008, when social media was still entering the mainstream, but its

assertion—that information about children does not belong on the internet—remains core to the argument that sharenting constitutes a problem.

If the “problem” of sharenting continues to gain legitimacy, could authorities use sharenting as evidence of one’s fitness to parent? The two examples above illustrate sharenting being taken up in the rationality of case management risk, but one could imagine the development of technologies specific to potentiality risk. For example, researchers might discover strong correlations between parents’ social media posting habits and children’s experiences of bullying. If they develop a risk assessment tool that predicts instances of child bullying, could parents face more severe consequences for posting in the face of such evidence? Researchers have already taken steps in this direction with regard to privacy and security, correlating Facebook data with public records to show the possibility of gleaning names, birthdates, addresses, and political affiliation data about families based on pictures of children posted on Facebook (Minkus et al., 2015). And authorities have already determined that it is appropriate to judge people based on their social media presence; consider that the U.S. government collects social media account information from up to 15 million visa applicants and travelers a year (Patel et al., 2019). The policy ostensibly exists to detect security threats but appears to target Muslims and those from the Middle East.

My analysis suggests that sharenting, and potentiality risk more broadly, is not so cohesive that parents experience systematic harm from it. But interest in sharenting, particularly from researchers, is growing. Between 2015 and 2020, the number of Google Scholar results for the term sharenting jumped by a whopping 1,363 percent, from 19 to 278 results. Increased

attention does not mean that sharenting and potentiality risk will definitely become more consequential. The world is not a deterministic place. Authorities try to shape behavior but there is no guarantee their programs will operate according to plan. Parents and others find ways to resist, and unintended consequences arise (Miller & Rose, 2008).

Governmentality is not in the business of identifying inevitabilities. As an analytical practice, it seeks to open space for critical reflection and imagination, asking, is this how we want the world to be? How else can the world exist? For this reason, a governmentality analysis of sharenting is especially timely. By investigating what makes sharenting a problem and how experts believe the problem should be addressed, I identify an opportunity orient away from blaming and burdening parents and toward addressing the broader sociotechnical conditions that give rise to concerns of datafication. The time to enact this shift is now, before the programs and technologies of potentiality risk have cohered and taken root.

This chapter explained how sharenting discourse harnesses risk to turn sharenting into a problem. In the next chapter, I examine how sharenting discourse intervenes at the level of subjectivity, inviting parents to govern their own social media use or risk being judged for inadequately embodying their parental role.

Chapter 7: Obliging Parents to Govern Their Social Media Use

7.1. Introduction: What It Means to Be a Parent

The father was not doing well. He'd fallen behind on his second mortgage. His wife was trying to sell their furniture online. Seven-year-old Sam blew the family's chance at winning \$10,000 when he answered incorrectly on a television game show. Baby Laurie had a lazy eye, but no health insurance meant no surgery to fix it. The last straw fell when his boss joked about Laurie's eye; he punched his boss, losing his job. After another argument with his wife, the father retreated to The Shovel, where bartender Jim reminded him that he had options. Jim said he knew a guy who would pay for emailed pictures of the kids, up to \$600 for a full-frontal shot of both together. The father said he wasn't interested. Yet hours later, as he kissed Sam's sleeping forehead, he may have pulled the blankets down past the boy's chest.

This father is a character in a dystopian short story called *Heartland* (Weinstein, 2016). The story ends ambivalently, with the reader unsure if the father actually exploited his son or only imagined doing so. Either way, the story is gut-wrenching, not just because the father behaved inappropriately but because he failed to be the child's protector, violating a core tenet of the parent-child relation. Readers judge him not just for *doing* wrong, but also for *being* wrong. The latter is more damning because it cuts down to the level of one's identity, one's subjectivity.

When certain actions, like protecting a young person, become so tightly bound to a social role, like that of a parent, a subject position emerges. When people internalize this link, power, as a force of social control, does not need to instruct people how to act. Instead, it simply needs

to position them as particular kinds of subjects and invite them to meet their social expectations or risk being ostracized. No one needs to tell parents to protect their children, and no one hesitates to judge parents who fail to. This process of defining what constitutes appropriate behavior is known as governmentality, and one of its most effective ways of operating is through people who take up specific subject positions (Miller & Rose, 2008).

Through narrative fiction, *Heartland* uncomfortably provokes questions about what it means to be a parent and provide for a family. It appeals to a shared understanding of the parental subject to elicit strong emotion from readers. Recognizing the discursive work that subjectification performs, in this chapter, I examine how a different genre of discourse—that of academic research—also appeals to particular understandings of the parent-child relation to examine a more benign version of the *Heartland* father’s actions—that of posting (non-exploitative) pictures and information about children online. While academic research may examine how subjectivity emerges, it not usually a site for studying this process. Yet academic researchers construct subject positions all the time—consider the way that human-computer interaction researchers position their work as studying users (J. Bardzell & Bardzell, 2015; Baumer & Brubaker, 2017). By studying how research on parents’ social media use constructs parent-child subject relations, I show how the process of knowledge production embeds assumptions about the way society expects the world to work, leaving them less open to question.

7.2. Subjectification and Contemporary Parenting

French philosopher Michel Foucault studied how power operates to position individuals as specific kinds of subjects—the madman, the criminal, the deviant (Dreyfus et al., 1983). This process of governing regulates conduct not through force, but through knowledge and subjectivity. The term “government” typically evokes images of state actors passing laws to delineate what society can and cannot do. However, the mentality of setting standards and holding people to them operates beyond the realm of law. Consider beliefs and expectations surrounding pregnancy. While laws govern certain aspects of pregnancy (especially related to abortion), media, science, and medicine also instruct pregnant people how to behave (Lupton, 2013). Where legal authorities enforce compliance via the threat of punishment, other authorities invite people to fulfill the responsibilities of their social role, in this case, to embody an expectant parent. As such, “[g]overnment involves not just the ordering of activities and processes. Governing operates through subjects” (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 42).

The act (and art) of governing takes on different forms. Authorities can captivate, harnessing people through charisma. They can educate, training people to think in particular ways. And they can convert, transforming people at the level of personhood so people change how they make sense of the world. Miller and Rose (2008) call conversion the most “potent...way of acting upon others” (p. 147) because it operates at the level of subjectivity. Changing someone’s subjectivity means altering the way they relate to themselves and others. Consider the difference between an undergraduate and doctoral experience. Both are educational

programs that culminate in a degree, but the PhD is as much about becoming a scholar as learning to do research (Barnacle, 2005).

Subjectification is the process by which discourses situate individuals in particular subject positions, or social roles, while subjectivity refers to the individual's own experience of the process (J. Bardzell & Bardzell, 2015; Dreyfus et al., 1983). A governmentality analysis traces the process of subjectification and opens the space for new forms of subjectivity to emerge. Tracing this process can provide a path through seemingly intractable problems. For instance, the academic job search is a particularly fraught process for PhD students. When you've spent years learning to be a scholar, failing to get a stable job as a scholar feels like an indictment of your identity rather than a reflection of a terrible job market. Recognizing—and resisting—the ways that doctoral education intertwines one's work and one's identity can help students cope with the process and imagine other pathways for themselves (though structural changes and investments in higher education are absolutely necessary to address the problems of finding post-doctoral employment).

People who experience a transformation of subjectivity internalize the expectations of their subject position. In other words, they know how to behave without being told. The vehicle that drives this self-regulating capacity is knowledge, specifically expertise, or the “social authority ascribed to particular agents and forms of judgment on the basis of their claims to possess specialized truths and rare powers” (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 26). Academic knowledge is one form of expertise, which derives legitimacy from the systematic methods that underpin empirical work and the peer-review process that governs its publication. In the context of

parenting, the growth of child development as a field of scientific inquiry ushered child rearing into the realm of expertise (N. S. Rose, 1999a). Advice from relatives gave way to guidelines from experts like Dr. Spock and manuals like the famed “What to Expect When You’re Expecting” (Grant, 1998; Hulbert, 2003).

As families strive for the “financial, educational and moral means to ‘pass’ in their role as active citizens in responsible communities,” they “enterprise” their lives by trying to make the “right” choices (Miller & Rose, 2008, p. 98). The number of choices has multiplied to span so many dimensions of a child’s life—bottle or breastfeed, co-sleep or cry it out, stay at home or daycare—that an ideology of intensive mothering has taken root, so named because the burden of making and maximizing the decisions often falls on women (Hays, 1996). Here, the subject position of mother goes beyond providing for a child’s needs but also investing the bulk of her time, energy, and money into raising a productive member of society (Hays, 1996; N. S. Rose, 1999a; Senior, 2015). The term “invest” is intentional, as over the past century and a half, with the demise of child labor and rise of universal education, children went from actively contributing to family functions to preparing to be future contributors to society (Zelizer, 1985). The task of parenting is now to ensure a good return on this investment.

One perennial source of concern and frustration related to children’s well-being is family media and technology practices (Banet-Weiser, 2004; S. Livingstone, 2007). As children play, communicate, create, learn, and socialize online, parents feel pressure to manage children’s screen time and protect them from threats while also supporting their digital literacy (Clark, 2014; S. M. Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Certain types of media, like educational programs

and closed virtual worlds like Minecraft gain acceptance as more appropriate, and thus “good” for children. This creates normative expectations for parents—the “good” parent ensures that children use the “right” kinds of media (Briggs, 2009; Willett, 2015)—and parents must negotiate these expectations with the reality of their everyday life.

The responsibility to manage children’s media, and children’s lives more broadly, brings with it the duty to monitor children as well. This monitoring is not punitive but caring. It seeks not to punish children, but to ensure their well-being, often with the help of digital technologies, from baby monitors to teen online safety apps. As such, parents now also take on the subject position of surveillant consumer, purchasing the latest technologies to meet their parenting responsibilities (L. Stark & Levy, 2018). But these responsibilities are themselves constructed. For example, one common and widespread fear is that too much screen time for children can lead to psychological difficulties, which explains why parents are expected to manage and monitor their children’s screen time. While many academic studies suggest this link exists, much of this research is low-quality and lacks nuance (Orben, 2020), suggesting that perhaps society can cut parents some slack.

It is in this spirit that I undertake a governmentality analysis of academic scholarship on parents’ social media use. The topic of digital parenting primarily focuses on parents’ actions related to *children’s* media use. In contrast, work on parents’ social media use seeks to govern *parents’* media use by targeting the child-related information parents post on social media. I focus on academic articles because knowledge, the product of expertise, legitimizes the activities of government. That is, when experts convert information into fact, those facts become reasons

why people should behave in a certain way. Other ways of behaving become marked as unacceptable or inappropriate. My analysis examines how academic scholarship turns parents and children into particular kinds of subjects (i.e., subjectifies them) and then frames posting about children on social media as something “good” parents manage or avoid (i.e., subjects parents to regulation).

7.3. Methods: Assembling and Analyzing Academic Scholarship

My analysis encompasses 88 academic articles published between 2009 and March 2020. “Sharenting” is the term academic researchers and journalists increasingly use to refer to the practice of parents posting information about children online, so to locate articles, I first searched for the term “sharenting” in a variety of academic databases. I read each result, excluding those that were not in English or referenced the topic only in passing (i.e., mentioned sharenting as an area of study but stated that they were studying something different).¹⁴ I then reviewed the citation lists of each selected article and identified additional articles that addressed the practice of parents posting information about their children online but did not necessarily use the term “sharenting.” Aligning with governmentality’s epistemological underpinnings, this collection constitutes a field of discourse, not a dataset of articles. Despite the academic nature of the source material, my analysis is not a literature review nor a meta-analysis. It does not describe or

¹⁴ The search included the following databases: Academic Search Ultimate, ACM Digital Library, Business Source Complete, Communication and Mass Media Complete, Education Source, ERIC, Google Scholar, Hein Online, Library & Information Science Source, Medline, PsycINFO, Pubmed, Science Direct, SocArxiv, SocIndex, and Web of Science.

synthesize a body of work; rather, it traces how discourse operates through text to regulate conduct.

To conduct a governmentality analysis, I adopted the method of thinking with theory, in which researchers interact with source material in dialogue with a particular theoretical concept (A. Y. Jackson & Mazzei, 2012). After I developed fluency with governmentality, I read each article and wrote notes on how it defined sharenting, how it framed the question or problem that motivated its analysis, what disciplinary knowledge and research methods it drew on, how it characterized the role of parents and children, and what interventions it advocated to address issues or concerns. I continuously returned to the literature on governmentality and subjectification, documenting turns of phrase and points from the articles that stood out. I wrote notes connecting the literature to the articles, focusing on how they discursively and materially positioned parents and children in subject relations.

7.4. Three Parent-Child Subject Relations: Adversarial, Stewardship, and Representational

The scholarship I analyzed includes empirical research, conceptual essays, legal analysis, and some system design. This work comes from a variety of academic disciplines, spanning media and communication, human-computer interaction, legal studies, internet studies, sociology, and marketing. The empirical research employs conventional data collection and analysis methods, including interviews, focus groups, surveys, ethnography, and content/textual analyses of social media posts and other online information. These studies are largely qualitative, though a few use computational methods to analyze large datasets scraped from social media

(e.g., Ammari et al., 2018; Sivak & Smirnov, 2019). This work is grounded almost entirely in the Western cultural contexts of the U.S., Europe, and Australia; work beyond those contexts comes from Singapore and China (Abidin, 2015b; Orgad & Meng, 2017). I offer this summary not as a systematic categorization of the articles, but as way to orient readers in the discursive terrain that my analysis traverses.

My governmentality analysis examined how academic research on parents' social media use subjectifies parents and children. I traced three subject relations, each of which construes sharenting, and the role that parents and children play in it, differently. In the adversarial relation, sharenting poses a conflict between a parent's right to free expression and a child's right to privacy. In the stewardship relation, sharenting entails a responsibility that parents must manage until children develop the capacity to do so themselves. In the representational relation, sharenting prompts questions about the fluid boundaries between parent and child identities.

Individuals constantly occupy and navigate overlapping subject positions (J. Bardzell & Bardzell, 2015). As such, these subject relations are not exhaustive, nor mutually exclusive. If the academic discourse I analyzed was a ball of yarn, these subject relations would be the different colors of yarn; they are distinct yet intertwined. All three relations could show up in the same article, with different sentence espousing different relations. By tracing how these relations position parents and children, I untangle that ball of yarn and open space to knit something new.

7.4.1 The Adversarial Relation: Parents versus Children

In the adversarial relation, parents and children possess distinct interests and authority, which sharenting brings into conflict. The interests and authorities are not themselves new, rather, “the rapid advancement of information communications technology and the societal and cultural shifts that see individuals needing and wanting to share information about themselves with the world” (Gligorijević, 2019, p. 202) have resulted in the “novel conflict” of sharenting (Keith & Steinberg, 2017, p. 413). And although “parents have long shared information about their children, with friends, family and colleagues, online disclosures are of much longer lasting impact and significance” (Bessant, 2018, p. 20). Today’s children “have a larger and more diverse digital identity than previous generations” (Buchanan et al., 2019, p. 169), something that puts their privacy and reputation at risk. This risk motivates scholarly investigation into sharenting; in other words, knowledge about how and why sharenting threatens children is necessary so that society can protect children from the negative effects of sharenting.

As subjects, parents enjoy a right to free expression, which in the case of sharenting manifests as the right to communicate their parenting experiences to others. They also possess the legal and moral authority to make decisions on behalf of children, including choices related to information disclosure (Ammari et al., 2015; Bessant, 2018; Cino & Vandini, 2020; Gligorijević, 2019; Siibak & Traks, 2019; Steinberg, 2017). Children enjoy a right to privacy under international human rights law (Lievens et al., 2019) and the right to have their personal data erased under E.U. law (Bunn, 2019; Lievens & Vander Maelen, 2019). American law acknowledges children’s interest in privacy, but both American and British law are unlikely to

prevent a parent from posting about a child online, even if doing so implicates a child’s privacy (Bessant, 2018; Steinberg, 2017). While Bessant (2018) suggests that existing laws do not “adequately recognize that children have an absolute right to privacy, independent from their parents” (p. 13), Moser et al. (2017) note that “children do not have an inherent right to privacy from their parents” (p. 5221).¹⁵

The law has typically bundled family privacy rights together, holding parents responsible for ensuring that a child’s privacy is respected (Sorensen, 2016). However, since parents disclose information about children online—an action presumed to compromise or violate privacy (Kopecky et al., 2020; Minkus et al., 2015)—scholars increasingly assert that sharenting poses a conflict of interest (Bessant, 2018; Gligorijević, 2019; Lievens et al., 2019; Steinberg, 2017):

While parents have almost exclusively been seen as the protectors of their children against the potential harm of media exposure and engagement, they are now increasingly being regarded as (potential) violators of their children’s rights and well-being. The reason is the popular practice of ‘sharenting.’ (Damkjaer, 2018, p. 209)

In cases where children’s and parents’ privacy interests collide, courts have typically deferred to parental authority, amounting to a doctrine that one scholar characterizes as “prioritiz[ing] parental control and consent above the harm of intrusion to the child” (Gligorijević, 2019, p. 201).

Sharenting thus presents a “difficult task of balancing” these two “intertwined” interests (Steinberg, 2017, p. 869). The task is challenging because the information in question “relates to

¹⁵ For a detailed account of children’s privacy interests, see Shmueli & Bletcher-Prigat (2011).

both [the] child's experiences and the parent's experiences as a parent and arguably belongs to both of them" (Bessant, 2018, p. 20). Furthermore, "it is not clear when a parent's right to determine how their family's information is used gives way to the child's right to privacy" (Bessant, 2018, p. 20). Parental authority carries more weight in the relationship, leaving children with little remedy against their parents' posting practices:

First, children are expected to abide by the will of their parents. Second, children might lack opportunity to express their disdain or other feelings, such as embarrassment, humiliation, anger, or hurt. Finally, children might lack an understanding of the implications of their parents' online conduct. (Steinberg, 2017, p. 868)

Empirical studies find that children do express some frustration with their parents' posting practices, wanting parents to ask permission before posting and to avoid posting information that could reflect negatively on the child (Hiniker et al., 2016; Lipu & Siibak, 2019; Moser et al., 2017; Ouvrein & Verswijvel, 2019; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020; Verswijvel et al., 2019). One study found that teens report taking greater steps to manage what their parents post about them compared to peers' posting (De Wolf, 2020). In some cases, parents rebuff children's requests to seek permission before posting, appealing to their parental authority (Lipu & Siibak, 2019; Santarossa & Woodruff, 2020).

Metaphorically, the adversarial relation can be imagined as a lever, with parent's rights on one side and children's interests/rights on the other (See Figure 7.1). Sharenting raises questions about what the balance between the two should be. In the adversarial subject relation, parents pose a threat to their children's rights, however unintentional. For instance, "parental sharing can inadvertently take away a child's intrinsic right to determine their own identity"

(Keith & Steinberg, 2017, p. 413). Children lose the ability to tell their life story on their terms (Hall, 2018; Steinberg, 2017), which could negatively affect their psychological health (Bunn, 2019). Parents occupy the dual role of “gatekeepers of their children’s personal information” and “narrators of their children’s personal stories,” leaving children with “little protection as their online identity evolves” (Steinberg, 2017, p. 839). Some scholars advocate legal reforms to protect children from the negative effects of sharenting (Bunn, 2019; Gligorijević, 2019; Hall, 2018; Lievens & Vander Maelen, 2019; Sorensen, 2016). However, because parental authority often legally supersedes children’s rights, others acknowledge that legal measures are unlikely to sufficiently protect children. They advocate public education campaigns, led by pediatricians (Keith & Steinberg, 2017; Steinberg, 2017), policymakers (Bessant, 2018), or schools (Souris, 2018) to inform parents of the risks of sharenting and to encourage parents to use social media in ways that do not jeopardize their child’s best interests.

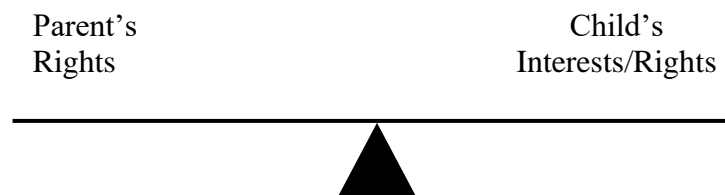


Figure 7.1: Balancing Rights in the Adversarial Relation

7.4.2. The Stewardship Relation: Parents for Children

In the stewardship relation, parents and children possess different capacities, and sharenting constitutes a responsibility that parents manage until children are capable enough to take it on themselves. For instance, in the context of children’s privacy, Moser et al. (2017) explain that “parents are afforded the right—and the responsibility—of making decisions on

behalf of their child, a right that phases in agency and autonomy as the child matures and develops” (p. 5221). The children’s rights movement established children as legitimate rights-holders by virtue of their existence, and legal theory surrounding parenthood has evolved from a property approach to a trustee approach. That is, parents are less “owners” of children and more stewards who act in children’s best interest until children reach “a point in their mental development that they can act to protect their own interests” (Sorensen, 2016, p. 171).¹⁶ In the context of sharenting, parents “act as shepherds of their children’s online privacy until the children can assume ownership over their digital identities” (Steinberg, 2017, p. 883). Research is needed to understand how this process works and how society can support parents as they engage in it.

Today’s parents regularly use social media to communicate with others about their parenting experiences, which involves disclosing information about children (Davis et al., 2015; Lupton et al., 2016; Morris, 2014). This means that children now “inherit a persistent online identity created for them by their parents, likely started before they are even born” (Ammari et al., 2015, p. 1901), considering that expectant parents discuss pregnancy and post sonograms online (Leaver, 2015a; Seko & Tiidenberg, 2016). Ammari et al. (2015) coin the term “parental disclosure management” to refer to the process of parents deciding what to post online about their children and negotiating these decisions with partners. Researchers have developed various

¹⁶ For in-depth accounts of this legal evolution, see Archard (2004), Rodham (1973) and Woodhouse (1992).

typologies to categorize how parents manage this process and what strategies they use to protect children's privacy (Autenrieth, 2018; Chalklen & Anderson, 2017; Damkjaer, 2018).

Parents recognize that very young children do not have a chance to say, "Hey Mom, could you not put that on Facebook" (P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015, p. 1310). They feel a duty to consider how their posting could affect their child's privacy, a responsibility that Kumar and Schoenebeck (2015) call "privacy stewardship." However, as stewards, parents experience an "almost impossible tension between the expectation that they will document and archive their children's social lives, while simultaneously ensuring that their child's privacy is protected and identity is carefully stewarded" (P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015, p. 1310).

Parents are not the only ones responsible for privacy stewardship, as teachers and childcare workers also create information about children and post it online. This can produce frustration for parents who may perceive teachers' and caregivers' actions as undermining their ability to manage their children's digital identities (Cino & Vandini, 2020). Parents and teachers feel underprepared to act as custodians for children's digital presence: parents worry about the ways a digital presence could harm their children and feel scrutinized, while teachers express anger about having to manage children's digital presence with little guidance or preparation from their employers (Buchanan et al., 2019).

Like the adversarial relation, the stewardship relation treats children as individuals with rights. But the stewardship relation acknowledges that rights operate differently for children "because children are not yet psychologically and physically mature"; they are developing "to

become adults” (Lievens & Vander Maelen, 2019, p. 65). Privacy helps children develop their personalities, integrity, independence, and autonomy (Bessant, 2018; Sorensen, 2016).

Metaphorically, the stewardship relation can be imagined as an inclined plane, where sharenting entails parents gradually shifting the responsibility of managing a digital footprint onto children as they develop the capacities to do so (See Figure 7.2). In the stewardship relation, children are thus agents-in-the-making, developing the capacities that will eventually equip them to make their own decisions and participate in society. Here, sharenting is a responsibility parents manage on behalf of children. By conscientiously attending to their child’s digital identity, parents can foster well-being through healthy family relationships (Ammari et al., 2015; Keith & Steinberg, 2017) and equip children with the skills they will need to become productive members of the information economy (Buchanan et al., 2019). Researchers advocate that social media platforms incorporate design features that help parents manage their children’s digital identities (Ammari et al., 2015; Moser et al., 2017) and propose an ethical framework for stewarding children’s digital identities that centers respect for children (Buchanan et al., 2019). Other scholars situate sharenting within a broader milieu of datafication and caution that the prevalence of data about children might impinge on children’s ability to act as citizens and political subjects. They call for the development of theoretical and methodological frameworks that respect children’s voices, advance justice, and enable children to reach their potential (Barassi, 2018, 2019; Lupton & Williamson, 2017; Mascheroni, 2018).

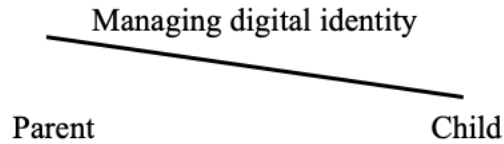


Figure 7.2: Developing Capacity in the Stewardship Relation

7.4.3. The Representational Relation: Parents through Children

In the representational relation, parents and children possess connected identities but also embody distinct selves. Sharenting raises questions about where the boundaries between parent and child exist and how (or whether) the two selves separate from each other. In other words, “[w]here does the parental self end and the child’s self begin online?” (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 111). In this relation, identity and information between parents and children are inherently shared, not mutually exclusive:

For instance, when parents are invited to imagine a future in which their child calls them to account regarding their sharing practices, the implication is that they have shared information belonging to *someone else*. Yet, from the first ultrasound scan onward, parents are encouraged to share images and stories of their *own* experiences *as parents*. (ibid, emphasis in original).

Preparing for and settling into the social role of parent typically requires disclosing information about children, which is a form of representing them. Nowadays, parents use websites, discussion forums, blogs, and apps to find information related to conception, pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing. They use email, smartphones, and social media to communicate and keep in touch with family, friends, and other parents (Lupton et al., 2016). Using social media, and digital media more broadly, helps men learn how to adapt to the social role of father (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015, 2016) and helps women experience the “peace of mind” that they are capable of successfully transitioning into their parental role (Lupton, 2017).

More pseudonymous social media platforms such as Reddit offer spaces for parents to discuss more stigmatized aspects of parenting or to vent, for example, about relatives who won't follow parents' preferences surrounding posting pictures of children online (Ammari et al., 2018).

Social media can also help parents adapt to unexpected dimensions of their parenting role, such as caring for a child with special needs (Ammari et al., 2014; Borgos-Rodriguez et al., 2019).

Social and digital media help parents discover how to occupy the role of parent; they also provide a means for parents to represent themselves in that role. Using Facebook, especially to post pictures of a new baby, can help new parents enact their parenting identities and find satisfaction in their parenting role (Bartholomew et al., 2012; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). For some parents, especially mothers, writing about their experiences or photographing their children is a way of representing themselves as parents (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Dobson & Jay, 2020; Durrant et al., 2018; L. Harding, 2016; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015). One mother suggests that “photography in the digital age ultimately dissolves distinctions between mother and child” (L. Harding, 2016, p. 109), though research also finds that mothers want to use social media in ways that represent their identities as more than “just” a mother (Gibson & Hanson, 2013). Beyond the individual parent identity, social media provides a vehicle for constituting family identity and documenting family memory, much the way family albums have for more than a century (Holloway & Green, 2017; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015).

Enacting one's parental identity online is also a response to the weight parents feel to engage in responsible or “good” parenting, especially within neoliberal contexts that treat life circumstances as the outcomes of individual decision-making (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017;

Lazard et al., 2019; Lupton, 2017; Orgad & Meng, 2017). Nevertheless, Damkjaer (2018) acknowledges that “parents’ approaches to communication technologies do not spring from rational, intentional decision making, but rather from the competing demands of social, work and family life, self-realisation and the desire to be good parents” (p. 210).

Parents, especially mothers, who appear to focus too much on presenting themselves as good parents, may face critiques that they are treating their children as props (Dobson & Jay, 2020; Lazard et al., 2019; Seko & Tiidenberg, 2016). At the same time, parents encounter direct and indirect pressure to engage in sharenting. Family members may ask parents to post information about children or critique their decision not to (Damkjaer, 2018). Companies encourage parents to disclose information about children as part of their marketing activities on Facebook and Twitter (Fox & Hoy, 2019; Niquette, 2017), and corporate advertising depicts sharenting as “fundamental to building and sustaining good family life” (Orgad & Meng, 2017, p. 471). Sharenting—and tracking information about children more generally—becomes a way for parents to demonstrate care (Leaver, 2015a, 2017; Lupton, 2017). When parents monetize their sharenting activities, representing the parent, child, or family identity online can become a way to earn a living (Abidin, 2015b, 2017; Archer, 2019; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Borgos-Rodriguez et al., 2019; O’Neill, 2019).

Parents who post information about children online act as publishers (Leaver, 2015b) or narrators (Steinberg, 2017) of children’s stories. Interviews with parents suggest they actively and thoughtfully consider how their posting might reflect on children (Autenrieth, 2018; Blackwell et al., 2016; Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; P. Kumar & Schoenebeck, 2015).

Nevertheless, by creating data that represents children, parents may be putting their children's privacy and security at risk (Lupton, 2017; Lupton et al., 2016) and limiting children's ability to control what information about themselves exists online (Leaver, 2015a, 2017; Leaver & Highfield, 2018; Orton-Johnson, 2017). These concerns echo those of the adversarial and stewardship relations. But where those relations focus on children's rights and capacities, respectively, the representational relation focuses on their identities. When identity is conceptualized as something individual, sharenting poses the question of how to determine whether information posted online belongs to a parent or child (Bessant, 2018). However, Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2017) note that, "few social scientific theories of identity would assert a one-to-one mapping of identity onto individuals" (p. 111). They suggest that sharenting is less a conflict and more a tension that raises broader societal questions about the limitations of approaching identity as an individual matter.

For parents, these "digital" dilemmas are intensified by the twin truths that to represent one's own identity *as a parent* means making public aspects of a (potentially vulnerable) child's life and yet *because they are the parent*, they are precisely the person primarily responsible for protecting that child's privacy. This poses more than just practical dilemmas about social media use, for it forces a comparison—for researchers, but also for society—of relational versus individualistic conceptions of identity, ethics, privacy, and responsibility. (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017, p. 112, emphasis in original)

Metaphorically, the representational relation can be imagined as a wedge (See Figure 7.3), where parent and child identities gradually separate, and sharenting becomes a means for working through that tension.

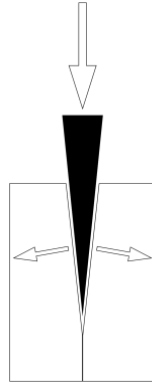


Figure 7.3: Questioning Identity in the Representational Relation. Source: Wikimedia Commons

7.5. What Subject Relations Do

Academic scholarship is a discursive field that shapes the world. While analyses of academic articles typically focus on the world-shaping effects of their research findings or conclusions, in this chapter, I traced how academic research on parents' social media use constructs parents and children in three distinct subject relations: adversarial, stewardship, and representational. Chapters 5 and 6 showed how expertise renders social media use as a problem for individual parents to address. This analysis explains what makes individual responsabilization so compelling—it taps into people's subjectivity. It also shows how research, conventionally treated as producing objective information about the world, itself contributes to subjectification.

The three parent-child subject relations tap into distinct cultural discourses. The adversarial relation, with its focus on sharenting as a conflict of parent and child rights, embodies a legalistic mentality that strives to judge right from wrong. The stewardship relation, with its focus on sharenting as a responsibility that parents manage until children develop the capacity to do so themselves, embodies a developmental mentality that treats children as works-in-progress.

The representational relation, with its focus on sharenting as a manifestation of identity, embodies a phenomenological mentality that prompts profound questions about the meaning and experience of parenthood and childhood. In this section, I consider the discursive effects of these different relations and the kinds of interventions they prompt.

Contemporary law and society generally give parents wide latitude to raise children as they see fit.¹⁷ Yet, some scholars assert that sharenting challenges the validity of this premise. The adversarial relation treats sharenting as a violation, positioning parents as perpetrators and children as victims. One legal scholar calls it “unfortunate” that courts “view parents as guardians of their children’s privacy rather than as privacy threats” (Bessant, 2018, p. 20). Perhaps recognizing the gravity of categorizing something as ubiquitous as social media use as a violation of children’s privacy, another legal scholar concluded her sharenting analysis by saying that she hoped readers would not interpret her article “as preachy or damning of other parents who, as stated herein, almost always have nothing but their children’s best interests at heart” (Steinberg, 2017, p. 884). Nevertheless, this discursive positioning of parents against children sets parents up to have to defend their social media use in the face of skepticism. It also suggests that interventions are needed to protect children *from* parents. As long as the state refrains from treating social media use as grounds for removing a child from parent custody, interventions will likely have to involve parents. This is where the stewardship relation comes into play.

¹⁷ Although who experiences this freedom in practice breaks down along race, class, and gender lines, as the behavior of poor black mothers is severely policed (Bridges, 2017).

Where the adversarial relation harnesses the repressive dimensions of power, the stewardship relation appeals to power as a productive force. This relation treats sharenting as a process to manage, positioning parents as fiduciaries and children as charges. Instead of chiding parents for using social media, it obliges parents to use social media responsibly in the name of supporting the best interests of their children. The data generated through parents' social media use still pertain to children, but this relation is less judgmental than the adversarial relation toward parents for their social media use. Educational interventions, such as pediatricians or government regulators providing social media guidance to parents (Bessant, 2018; Keith & Steinberg, 2017), appeal to the stewardship relation, seeking to equip or empower parents to make responsible choices regarding their social media use. Where the adversarial relation sets parents up to have to defend themselves, the stewardship relation sets parents up for guilt if they fail to live up to their duty.

The representational relation also harnesses the productive dimensions of power, but where the stewardship relation centers the child, the representational relation centers the parent, and particularly the parent's identity development. This relation treats sharenting as an enactment of being, positioning parents as selves and children as self-others, simultaneously part of and distinct from the parent. Where the other two relations approach sharenting as a task that requires some form of intervention, this relation takes sharenting as a provocation to rethink how society instantiates relational concepts like identity and privacy. For instance, social media platforms reinforce identity as discrete and singular by assigning each user a distinct and separate profile (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Szulc, 2019). This is a design choice; different choices

could provide opportunities to use technologies in ways that better reflect people's lived experiences.

When sharenting presents a provocation rather than a problem or task, space opens up to imagine alternative subject relations. For instance, what might the parent-child subject relation do in an actor-network where humans and non-humans exist on the same plane? What might the parent-child subject relation do in a dynamic assemblage, or an entangled existence? How would sharenting operate in those subject relations? The three relations presented in this chapter—the adversarial, the stewardship, and the representational—focus on the future consequences of sharenting. Alternate subject relations, especially grounded in postmodern epistemologies, can attune researchers to its present effects.

Chapter 8: Conclusion: Social Media as Spaces of Leakiness and Entanglement

8.1. Dissertation Synopsis

This dissertation began with the question: How did parents' social media use become a problem? As I traversed different research paradigms, I arrived in the figured world of post-structuralism, which considers how language constructs reality. My research question developed into: How has language worked to turn parents' social media use into a problem? I encountered governmentality, an analytical technique for tracing how power works to regulate people's conduct. My research question then refined into: How does power work through discourse to regulate parents' social media use? As I recognized how power justifies its governing efforts by appealing to expertise, the research question further honed into: How does power, manifesting as expertise, work through discourse to regulate parents' social media use?

To study this question, I turned to three discursive fields where power embodies different kinds of expertise. In academia, power manifests as the expertise to create knowledge (i.e., establish what is factual). In news media, power manifests as the expertise to represent the world (i.e., define what is happening). In social media, power manifests as the expertise to capture attention (i.e., express what is interesting.) These forms of expertise are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, academia and news media actively examine social media's role in establishing facts and defining news. But studying them separately enabled me to contextualize three specific processes through which expertise in American society governs parents and their social media use. Naming

and illustrating these processes is the first step toward imagining new ways of responding to the role of social media in contemporary parenting.

I developed three studies to examine how expertise worked in each discursive field to regulate parents' social media use. The first study, presented in Chapter 5, examines how expertise, programs, and technologies linked up to construct oversharing as a problem. I focus on STFU, Parents, a specific site of social media discourse explicitly dedicated to judging parents for their social media use and providing guidance about how they should use social media. Through a governmentality analysis of the STFU, Parents blog, column, and book, I show how STFU, Parents constructs the problem of "oversharing" by using the technologies of evidence and anonymity to portray content pertaining to "leaky bodies" as inappropriate for social media. "Oversharing" is a moralizing program, designed to blame parents, and especially mothers, for supposedly doing something wrong. Oversharing seeks to address the problem of people seeing content they may not want to see on social media by trying to bully parents into policing their social media use.

The second study, presented in Chapter 6, examines how expertise, programs, and techniques linked up to construct sharenting as problem. Through a governmentality analysis of 243 news articles, I demonstrate how news media constructs the problem of "sharenting" by portraying children's presence online as inherently concerning and then holding parents responsible for mitigating potential harms. The concerns of sharenting are persuasive in part because they appeal to children's status as "adults-in-the-making" and broader social fears of anything that may prevent children from becoming their "best selves." I contend that sharenting

expresses what I call a rationality of *potentiality risk*, which treats anything that might prevent a child from achieving their “true potential” as a threat. However, the worries of sharenting—physical, emotional, or psychological harm, misuse of information, lost privacy—are not unique to children and are not outcomes parents can control. They reflect anxiety about datafication, where the decisions that affect people’s lives are increasingly made by algorithms via inscrutable processes. The rationality of potentiality risk offers a means of dealing with this anxiety. Neoliberal society positions achieving one’s potential as the goal toward which individuals should strive. If, or perhaps when, they fail to accomplish it, neoliberal rationality suggests they have only themselves to blame (N. S. Rose, 1999a). While I focus on the way sharenting espouses potentiality risk, future work could consider how intimate surveillance (Leaver, 2017) or the quantified self movement operate as additional programs and technologies of potentiality risk.

The third study, presented in Chapter 7, examines how the discursive field of academia constructs the parent-child relation. Through a governmentality analysis of 88 academic articles, I discern three parent-child subject relations that each point to different kinds of intervention. The adversarial relation pits parent’s and children’s rights against each other and implies a potential need for legal redress. The stewardship relation encourages parents to manage social media on behalf of their children and implies a need for experts to educate parents on the best ways to fulfill their responsibility. The representational relation raises questions about the fluid boundaries between parent and child identity and invites society to rethink its emphasis on the

individual, rather than relational, dimensions of identity and privacy. I turn now to what these analyses show about the regulation of parents' social media conduct.

8.2. “Leaky Bodies” in the Public Sphere

The common thread tying the three discursive fields together is their reliance on social media as a public sphere. Section 3.3.2. explained how liberal capitalism relies on the concept of a gendered public-private distinction, deeming the spheres of politics and markets as the public domain of men and those of home and family the private domain of women. Women certainly participate in public spheres, but since such areas are not their “natural” home, they must learn how to comport themselves appropriately or face judgment for failing to do so. Governmentality offers a means to trace how authorities regulate this conduct of conduct.

In each discursive field I studied, expertise draws on distinct programs to govern the conduct of parents: those of propriety, risk, and subjectivity. STFU, Parents positions itself as an arbiter of propriety, defining what parents, and particularly mothers, should and should not post online about life with young children. Social norms and etiquette are powerful strategies for regulating conduct, but they only go so far. Some commentators on STFU, Parents resist the blog's authority and its logic equating social media as a public space, claiming it as their own space to share what they wish. Concerns about oversharing have also faded as mis- and dis-information have captured media attention. Efforts to govern social media conduct have moved away from how such conduct reflects on parents and toward its potential effects on children.

News discourse treats the posting of information about children online as risky, warning parents who do so of the negative consequences that could befall their children. This line of thinking draws on discourses of child protection and the figure of the child as an adult-in-the-making. Again, some parents resist such regulatory efforts, downplaying the concerns or asserting that posting information online does not legitimize others using it for their purposes.

Where risk attends to external events, or more precisely, the chance of their occurrence, authorities also work on people's interiority. Academic discourse appeals to subjectivity by obliging parents to internalize a responsibility to manage their social media use. Chapters 5 and 6 demonstrated how discourse positions mothers and children as not belonging on social media, at least not without certain precautions. Chapter 7 shows how expert discourse links the responsibility to manage one's social media use with the enactment of identity roles, which naturalizes the idea that not managing one's social media makes one a failed parent.

This dissertation traced how expertise harnessed programs and technologies to govern parents' social media conduct in three discursive fields. The next step is to connect these analyses to broader political rationalities that justify authorities' governing efforts. One avenue for doing so is to build on the connection between oversharing and Shildrick's (1997) "leaky bodies" articulated in Chapter 5. The content that STFU, Parents deems oversharing is content that confronts people with material and emotional leaks from the bodies of women and children. Leaks are negative; they happen when something isn't working properly, and they exemplify that boundaries are indeterminate. Systems of domination, from capitalism, heteropatriarchy, white

supremacy, colonialism, and others, rely on boundaries that enable some form of us-them sorting, distinguishing the dominators and the dominated.

Tracing leaks in these boundaries offers a way to destabilize them. The programs of oversharing and sharenting are concerned with the private leaking into the public. But acknowledging that the distinction between public and private is itself a patriarchal program (Allen, 2000; Bridges, 2017; Coontz, 2000; Gavison, 1992) shakes the foundation of oversharing and sharenting. Instead of wondering how to mitigate the leaks, we can ask why is it that the leaks of parents, particularly mothers, and children are concerning at all. Why don't parents and children belong online? Why is information posted online "fair game" for others to use as they wish? How can legitimate concerns about privacy, security, dignity, and autonomy be addressed in ways that don't reinscribe essentialist conceptions of mothers as overly emotional or children as vulnerable and innocent. How do privacy and agency work in a world of leaky bodies, leaky data, and leaky relations? These questions motivate my future work on the government of parents' social media use.

8.3. Theorizing Privacy as Entanglement

In Chapter 6, I emphasized that the concerns social media poses are not unique to children; rather, they are defining conditions of living in a datafied world. Regulating the behavior of individual parents is not going to interrupt problematic information flows that occur on the societal level. However, I contend that the parent-child relation offers a compelling site

for privacy theorizing because it calls into question dominant understandings of concepts like identity and agency that are often central to privacy.

The representational subject relation introduced in Chapter 7 suggests that sharenting forces society to grapple with the fact that individualistic understandings of identity, privacy, and agency perhaps don't line up with actual experience. If a parent and child both participate in an experience, how can they possibly determine who owns the information about that experience or who has a right to disclose it. Concepts of "ownership" and "rights" dominate current approaches to privacy, but perhaps that is precisely why privacy feels like such a wicked problem. Consider Communication Privacy Management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2002), commonly used in research on social media (Petronio & Child, 2020) and one of the few privacy theories to examine information flows within families (Petronio, 2010). The theory is premised on the idea that individuals own their information and believe they have a right to control it. The theory posits that individuals erect metaphorical boundaries around their information and develop rules to manage their information in ways that minimize risk (Petronio & Child, 2020).

More conceptually, the concept of networked privacy "invokes the constellation of audience dynamics, social norms, and technical functionality that affect the processes of information disclosure, concealment, obscurity, and interpretation within a networked public" (Marwick & boyd, 2014, p. 13). Networked privacy is dynamic and processual, involving "the ongoing negotiation of contexts in a networked ecosystem in which contexts regularly blur and collapse" (Marwick & boyd, 2014, p. 13). Yet it still centers on control. boyd (2012) acknowledges that "[a]ny model of privacy that focuses on the control of information will fail"

(p. 349) but suggests that networked privacy “requires meaningful control over the networked contexts in which the information flows” (Marwick & boyd, 2014, p. 13).

Channeling the subjectivity analysis of Chapter 7, what kind of individual do these privacy theories construct? A liberal one, as invoked by the concept of rights, a rational one, as invoked by the concept of making choices to maximize benefit, and an autonomous one, as invoked by the concept of controlling contexts. Legal scholar Julie Cohen (2013) explains that the liberal, rational, autonomous “self who is the subject of privacy theory and privacy policymaking does not exist....[T]he self who is the real subject of privacy law and policy is socially constructed, emerging gradually from a preexisting cultural and relational substrate” (p. 1905). Networked privacy has laid useful groundwork for studying privacy when so many of our interactions are digitally mediated. But when living is tantamount to generating data, or when our virtual and physical environments are designed and personalized based on data, privacy theory needs to rethink its assumptions about what, exactly, privacy does, and for whom. Blum-Ross & Livingstone (2017) offer a first step in addressing the “for whom” part of the provocation by connecting sharenting concerns to the fundamentally relational dimension of identity. By relational, they mean that our identities involve others. Without a child, a parent is not a parent.

Relationality emphasizes connections but still relies on the concept of the individual as a discrete entity. Post-structuralism and Foucault’s work on biopower demonstrate how discursive and material techniques construct individual entities, suggesting that the individual does not precede the relations. To theorize privacy in a relational way requires starting with the world as connection. This is the premise of entanglement. Entanglement posits that the world is

fundamentally connected, and that through action it is temporarily and locally separated into discrete entities (Barad, 2007). While entanglement is not a new concept, it is beginning to resonate in my neck of the scholarly woods, including information systems (Cecez-Kecmanovic et al., 2014; Hassan, 2016; S. V. Scott & Orlikowski, 2014), communication (Warfield, 2017), and HCI (Frauenberger, 2020). I aim to undertake the work of theorizing privacy as entanglement, starting with the entanglement of parents and children in social media and building on Julie Cohen's (2013, 2019b) theory of privacy as sheltering dynamic, emergent subjectivity as well as Karen Barad's (2007) theory of agency as the temporary separation of entangled entities to eventually explain how privacy operates when everyday life is datafied.

Afterward

When I tell people I'm a privacy researcher, I'm often met with jokes about job security. From news articles to legislative hearings to casual conversation, reports of new technologies often elicit questions about how such technologies infringe, erode, invade, violate, or kill privacy. The pattern is familiar: a new device, system, or app emerges; journalists, policymakers, and academics caution that it raises privacy concerns, but the technologies continue to be used, fueling debate about whether privacy is disappearing (John & Peters, 2017).

I wondered if this seemingly constant debate over privacy was connected to privacy having many different meanings. For my first-semester doctoral seminar project, I set out to create a disciplinary map of privacy, identifying what kinds of privacy questions different disciplines explore and what epistemologies, theories, and methods ground their analyses. I identified nine disciplines that studied privacy and mapped approaches in two—economics and law—before realizing this was a dissertation project, not a semester one. In another universe, I would have written that dissertation, but I came to the PhD to study the privacy implications of parents and social media use, so I set the privacy mapping project aside.

Nevertheless, questions about how disciplinary norms shape research chased me, manifesting as a preoccupation with what constituted my “home” discipline. I attended conferences and published papers in venues connected to human-computer interaction, media and communication, information, surveillance, internet studies, and computer science, but I didn't feel completely at home in any. I drew on theories and methods from sociology,

anthropology, cultural studies, science and technology studies, feminism, and law, and I aspired to do research that puts contemporary discussions about technology in historical context. What kind of a scholar did that make me? A friend responded that, to him, “what discipline are you,” matters mostly when looking for an academic job and needing to demonstrate a fit with a given department.¹⁸

His comment reminded me that disciplines, and the boundaries that differentiate them, are artificial. Disciplines are a way to manage complex institutions like universities and, in more cynical terms, to legitimize gatekeeping, rather than a reflection of any “true” divisions in knowledge. This is not to ignore the very real differences between disciplines, but to instead embrace working in what digital media scholar Jacqueline Wernimont (2018) calls “an undisciplined set of disciplines” (p. 3). She introduces her book, *Numbered Lives: Life and Death in Quantum Media*, as a “feminist, antiracist, alternative media history. It is also a study of science and technology, a literary reading, a material history, and a contribution to the history of mathematics and math instruments as well as media archaeology and digital studies” (p. 4). This is the kind of work I aspire to produce—scholarship that embraces its messiness rather than tries to impose order on it.

Contemporary PhD education emphasizes skill development and knowledge production over scholarly development and engagement with the concept of knowledge itself—this despite the degree being one of philosophy, regardless of discipline (Barnacle, 2005). While this rush to

¹⁸ I thank Andrew Schrock for this comment, which pulled me out when I felt like I was spinning my wheels.

application, as St. Pierre and colleagues (2016) call it, is understandable amidst a neoliberal milieu with diminishing tenure-track job openings, the commodification of knowledge can erode its potential for transformation. In other words, if we as scholars don't grapple with what kind of knowledge we create and what effect it has on the world, we risk reproducing the status quo and its oppressive and extractive tendencies.

Which brings me back to privacy. As I mentioned in the preface, I long envisioned this dissertation to center on privacy. Instead, it traced how a specific practice—that of parents' posting pictures of children on social media—came to be treated as a problem, one that implicates privacy and other concerns. I still aim to understand how this practice implicates privacy, but instead of asking whether privacy exists, I aim to investigate how privacy works. That is, what does invoking privacy, especially in relation to the use of digital technologies in everyday life, do? What practices, people, institutions, and ideologies does "privacy" center, what and whom does "privacy" marginalize, and what effects does this have on the world? Perhaps "privacy" will no longer sufficiently signify what I find worth fighting for, and some other term will resonate, even though language, much less knowledge, will never fully capture an ineffable world.

Writing a master's thesis left me with more questions than answers. The same is true for the dissertation, though the latter has also given me a sense of how to go about answering those questions. I feel extremely fortunate that I'll get to continue looking for those answers, having accepted a tenure-track position (at an iSchool, no less. I guess the answer was staring me in the face all along: my discipline is information, whatever that means.)

I began the preceding paragraph with the term, “writing” intentionally. This text in front of you does not simply represent my intellectual journey. Rather, the act of writing this dissertation brought the scholar I wanted to become into being, shaping my dissertation and subsequent research agenda. As much as I wanted this dissertation to be my *magnum opus*, presenting my definitive thoughts about oversharing and sharenting, it is, as so many told me it would be, only the beginning.

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