Connected Parenting: Digital discourse and diverse family practices

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Introduction

This book explores the relationship between everyday parenting, family practices and digital media in the lives of networked individuals who have access to an expansive repertoire of tools and technologies for relating to others and doing things in the world. It places social action at the centre of its investigation, considering how parents' actions and practices are constructed, translated and transformed in and through digitally mediated texts, and in turn, how those mediated actions relate to, and reverberate through, their wider practices, digital networks and social lives. This interwoven relationship between social action, mediated text and family practice is explored through the theorisation of *connected parenting* as a collection of practices that involves the construction, negotiation and maintenance of parenting and family practices *through* mediated connections with friends, family members, groups and communities.

This investigation of connected parenting practice draws from my own qualitative research with nine UK-based parents: the *Marginalised Families Online* study. The participants involved in this research constitute a relatively diverse group of parents, whose family structures and practices present a challenge to the limiting social, biological and legal structures that still dominate concepts of 'family' in contemporary UK society. They are all single, and/or lesbian, gay or bisexual, and they each brought children into their lives in non-traditional ways, for example through donor conception, surrogacy, adoption and other non-romantic arrangements. Over the course of eleven months (December 2018 – October 2019), each of these participants completed a short questionnaire, took part in three face-to-face interviews, and shared selections of their digital media from a range of apps and platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and WhatsApp. The research design and analytical impetus for this study combines the key principles and processes of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin & Strauss, 2015) and mediated discourse analysis (Norris & Jones, 2005; Scollon, 1998, 2001).

The concept of connected parenting is borne out of the Marginalised Families Online participants' experiences, their use of digital media, and their family practices. The experiences of one participant, Cheryl, usefully illustrate what I mean by connected parenting at this point. Cheryl, a single adoptive parent, relies almost exclusively on other adopters, especially single adopters, for

social, emotional and practical support, and connects with these parents primarily through digital media. She is emphatic about the importance of other adoptive parents in her life, claiming that without them, she 'wouldn't have survived', and pointing to multiple occasions when adopters have acted as an extended family network in times of need. For example, Cheryl points to the time her son was arrested, and she was waiting for him at a police station in the middle of the night. Distressed and alone, she reached out to a fellow adoptive parent, who stayed in contact with her throughout the night via mobile messaging and phone calls, helping her to navigate both her interactions with the police and her son. To give a more everyday example, Cheryl also frequently uses a single adopters' Facebook group to ask for advice and second opinions on domestic life decisions such as buying a new car, putting a property on the housing market, or choosing a new washing machine. At moments like these, Cheryl both takes action through connecting with others, and connects with others through the actions she takes. Her family practices are thus heavily shaped by and intertwined with her connection to a network of adoptive parents.

Through close examination of interview and digital data from the Marginalised Families Online participants, this book identifies three core dimensions of connected parenting:

1. collective connection
2. epistemic connection
3. affective connection

These dimensions are visually represented in Figure 1. In brief, collective connection revolves around the sharing and foregrounding of common experiences and circumstances. It can be realised through a mobile message saying 'I've done that too' when a friend shares a parenting mishap; through shared reference to 'our lives' in posts to a Facebook group of adopters, or through a request for others to share 'similar experiences' so that a single parent feels less alone in challenging times. Epistemic connection is practiced through the construction and exchange of information and knowledge, for example through positioning a life event as a 'top tip' for other single mothers in an Instagram post; through recommending a tried-and-tested suction bowl to members of a Facebook group who practice 'baby-led weaning', or through rousing tweets that mobilise a community of adoptive parents to challenge established forms of knowledge about children's behaviour. Finally, affective connection involves the formation of social ties through the construction and flow of emotions, feelings, moods, dispositions and attitudes, for example in a Facebook post that responds to a group member's cry for help with the words 'I'm sending you love ❤'; in a WhatsApp message that commiserates a friend with a 'big hug', or in retweets that recontextualise others' posts through an affective lens, with evaluations such as 'frightening', 'Aaagh!!', or 'love this ❤'. These are all

examples shared by the Marginalised Families Online participants, many of which will be examined more closely in the chapters that follow. As the visual illustration of Figure 1 demonstrates, these three dimensions of connected parenting combine and overlap, so that whilst they can be examined individually, they can also be understood as intersecting and complementary components of a larger constellation of practices. Taking influence from Scollon (2001, p. 4), I therefore describe connected parenting as a 'nexus of practice', a concept that will be explained further in Chapter 1.

Figure 1. The three core dimensions of connected parenting.
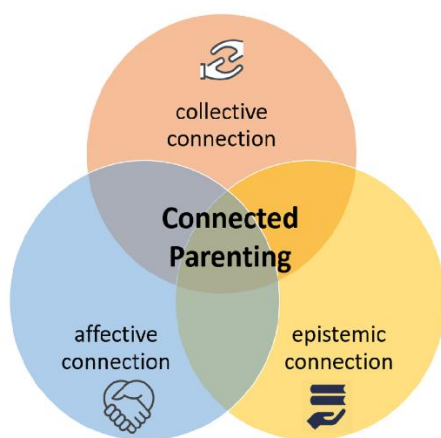
Through in-depth elaboration of connected parenting practice, this book contributes to scholarly investigations of parenting, family practices and digital media in two key areas. First, its focus on the practices of single, and/or lesbian, gay or bisexual parents who brought children into their lives in non-traditional ways provides the foundation for a diverse and expansive exploration of both familial and connective practices. This exploration departs from a continued emphasis on traditional nuclear families and heterosexually coupled mothers, both in a socio-cultural and academic context more generally, and in studies of parent-to-parent digital interactions and online communities more specifically. Further, my emphasis on social action and family practices facilitates a shift of emphasis away from family structures and roles, which can work to reinforce dominant ideals of family life and gendered parenthood. Instead, I embrace a more nuanced and flexible exploration of the wide-reaching practices that can extend beyond the traditional boundaries of nuclear families and parent-child relationships. This perspective is indebted to Morgan's (1996, 2011) work in family sociology, which has examined family practices as something people 'do', rather than family as something people 'are'. I build on this work through a mediated discourse analytical approach (Norris & Jones,

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2005; Scollon, 1998, 2001) which, similarly, centres action and practice in its exploration of discourse and social life. In the section that follows, I elaborate the concept of 'family practices' in more detail, explaining how it informs the research on which this book is based.

This book also continues an emerging trajectory in qualitative sociolinguistic research that situates participants as networked individuals with access to a wide range of mediated technologies, and examines their digital media use as it is intertwined with their everyday lives (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2021; Tagg & Lyons, 2020, 2021b, 2021a). Accordingly, the Marginalised Families Online study is concerned less with the structures and affordances of individual tools and technologies themselves, and more with the ways in which a constellation of connected parenting practices can be constructed and maintained across multiple sites of engagement. Further, whilst this book focuses primarily on parents' use of digital media, it seeks a holistic understanding of their digital media practices as they are integrated in, and overlap with, their everyday social lives, experiences and multi-modal communicative practices. More specifically, it builds on an emerging body of work that explores the complex ways in which parent-to-parent digital interactions and everyday parenting practice intertwine and overlap (e.g. Hanell & Salö, 2017; Lyons, 2020).

These themes and perspectives are examined over nine chapters. The present chapter elaborates the concepts of 'family practices' and 'connection', introduces the Marginalised Families Online participants, and provides a detailed overview of the book's contents. Chapter 1 outlines the methodological principles and processes that underpin this research, and offers a rationale for my combination of constructivist grounded theory and mediated discourse analysis. Chapter 2 shows how these methods were deployed in practice, including a detailed explication of the research design for the Marginalised Families Online study. In Chapters 3 to 8, I present the empirical findings of this research, with each chapter introducing on a different case study that exemplifies a specific dimension of connected parenting. As I will make clear throughout this book, the three key domains of connected parenting rarely operate in isolation. However, in order to fully examine each of these dimensions in depth, I take each one in turn, focusing on the *collective* elements of connected parenting in Chapters 3 and 4, the *epistemic* dimension in Chapters 5 and 6, and *affective* connection in Chapters 7 and 8. In Chapter 9, I re-unite dimensions in a summative examination of connected parenting as a single nexus of practice.

What are family practices?

Family practices, as defined in this book, include repeated actions and exchanges between parents or carers and their children, such as the everyday, mundane actions of changing a nappy, feeding a child or taking them to school, as well as the actions that combine to produce more significant

events such as bringing a child into the family, celebrating a birthday, or mourning a death. Family practices also, and importantly, include repeated caring and supportive actions that extend beyond the boundaries of the parent-child relationship: to romantic couples, friendship groups, small communities, or extended families, for example. Such expansive family practices may include maintaining close, regular contact, checking-in, sharing an embrace or holding hands. This book is titled 'connected *parenting*' because all of the participants who took part in the Marginalised Families Online project are parents, and most (but not all) of the digital interactions they shared relate in some way to the actions and practices they undertake as parents to their children. However, through an emphasis on *family practices*, we will also move beyond the parent-child relationship, to consider other family-related actions and practices. In this way, I open the door to an exploration of connected parenting that may be messy and diffuse, but is also open, nuanced, flexible, and able to account for the wide range of relationships and encounters that may form part of an individual's 'family life', including those that might be difficult to identify or categorise.

My exploration of connected parenting and diverse family practices brings multi-disciplinary perspectives to a discourse analytical project. It owes much to the field of family sociology, especially the work of Gabb (2011), Finch (2007) and Morgan (1996, 2011). Morgan's (1996; 2011) influential work on family practices places *action* and *practice* at the centre of family studies, precipitating a shift of emphasis from the structure of familial roles and relationships, to the way relationships, connections and commitments between intimates are realised and maintained by agentive social actors. As part of this shift, the field of family sociology has become more inclusive of non-traditional groups such as same-sex couples, extended kinship groups, close friendships defined as family, blended families, and families 'stretched across different households' or even across continents (Finch 2007, p. 67). Morgan's (1996) exploration of family practices also moves to reinstate links between family and community studies, situating family relationships in the wider context of overlapping familial, kinship, friendship and neighbourly ties. Extending the boundaries of 'family' in this way is particularly important for this book, which seeks to examine parents' family practices as they are constructed, mediated and mobilised through connections with a wide range of social actors.

Morgan's call for practice-based explorations of family life was extremely influential both within and beyond family sociology. However, since Morgan's first (1996) publication, others have worked to re-emphasise the relevance of wider historical and social structures for the constitution of family practices amongst different groups. Finch (2007), Gabb (2011) and Heaphy (2011), for example, note that 'displays' of family practices can take on very different meanings, and have very different consequences, for people who have been marginalised by normative social concepts of the ideal

family. As Heaphy (2011, p. 27) explains, white, middle-class, heterosexual families have 'historically been the benchmark' for 'successful families', and thus, family displays that fall outside of these narrow margins will always be measured against those norms. He gives the example of lone-parent families, for whom 'the risks of being judged as failing to display family appropriately are especially high', as they come up against 'constructions of feckless mothers, absent fathers and irresponsible single-parent families who 'sponge' on the state' (Heaphy, 2011, p. 27). Considering the simple family practice of holding hands, Gabb (2011) explains how, for same-sex parents, this often taken-for-granted gesture can be fraught with uncertainty and fear around whether it is safe to hold hands in a public place, and how a child may be affected by the consequences of this action – or indeed the consequences of withholding it. Some family practices then, as Gabb (2011, p. 55) shows, can have significant emotional consequences, 'both to the individuals involved and to the forms of family that can be displayed'. Taking account of these perspectives, which are particularly relevant for the parents who took part in my research, this book's exploration of connected parenting and family practice will connect the repeated actions and experiences of individual parents with wider social structures and constraints. In the section that follows, I further contextualise this discussion by outlining the social context in which this research took place.

Single, adoptive and LGBT parents

Sociological and psychological research has shown that, in the UK and U.S., two-parent heterosexual families continue to be positioned as the most 'natural', 'good' and in the 'best interest of the child' (Correia & Broderick, 2009, pp. 243, 245; Golombok, 2015; Malmquist, 2015). Research across the humanities and social sciences has shown that such narrow criteria for morally and normatively 'right' families has marginalised and stigmatised those who do not fit this mould. Same-sex parents, for example, continue to be depicted in media and popular culture as dangerous, incompetent and damaging for children in popular media and culture (Goldberg, 2012; L. Jones, Mills, Paterson, Turner, & Coffey-Glover, 2017). Gay male parents, in particular, often face both homophobic and sexist discrimination, based on persistent beliefs that women are better caregivers than men (Goldberg, 2012; Golombok, 2015), that gay men are not appropriate masculine role models, and even that gay men are likely to sexually abuse their children (Gianino, 2008). This research is further examined in my earlier work (Mackenzie, in press), which considers how the two gay fathers who participated in the Marginalised Families Online study work to negotiate normativities of gender, sexuality and the family.

Adoptive parents, many of whom are in same-sex couples[1], also face a good deal of social stigma, prejudice and misunderstanding. Because 'blood' ties are often implicitly favoured over social relatedness, adoption can be perceived as a 'second-best' route to parenthood and family life. Research has shown that adopters often internalise this stigma, resulting in feelings of inadequacy or inauthenticity (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Jennings, Mellish, Tasker, Lamb, & Golombok, 2014; Weistra & Luke, 2017). Further, adoptive parents frequently face a number of practical challenges. For example, a 2021 survey of 2,452 adopters and 159 adoptees found that 75% of adoptive families were experiencing challenges (Adoption UK, 2021). The study also showed that 28% of adoptees aged 16-25 were not in education, employment or training at the end of 2020, 46% had needed help from mental health services, and 53% of parents felt their 16-25 year old wasn't getting the support they needed.

Together with these social, emotional and practical challenges, adopters often feel that non-adopters have very little understanding of their lives. For example, Weistra and Luke's (2017, p. 237) study with 43 adoptive parents in the UK and Ireland found that 93% of participants agreed with the statement 'people in society do not understand adoptive families', as well as suggesting that they were portrayed, by the media and by non-adopters, in reductive and polarising ways: as either 'heroes' or 'desperate'. Weistra and Luke (2017) found that, as a result, adoptive parents were often unwilling to tell non-adopters when things weren't going well at home, or to be open about bad experiences; they also felt judged by non-adopters when their children acted out in public. Unsurprisingly, then, many adoptive parents say that they value peer support over and above both professional services and existing family and friends, and therefore work hard to 'surroun[d] themselves with other adoptive parents' (Weistra & Luke, 2017, p. 239; also see Bryan, Flaherty, & Saunders, 2010; Selwyn, Wijedasa, & Meakings, 2014). The close-knit groups that are formed as a result are described by many of Weistra and Luke's (2017) participants as being akin to family.

Single adoptive parents, further, may face additional stigma and social pressure, with research showing that single mothers continue to be vilified as a social threat in UK and U.S. media and health discourse (Mackenzie, 2021; McDermott & Graham, 2005; Salter, 2018). Research has shown that single mothers 'by choice', who often bring children into their lives through adoption or donor conception, frequently work to distinguish themselves from the stigmatised, stereotypical figure of the young, working-class, irresponsible single mum. However, they still face an additional set of prejudices around their adoptive status, or their use of donor conception. For example, single

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[1] Figures published by the Department for Education show that, in 2021, 1 in 6 adoptions were to same-sex couples: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions

women who have conceived via donor conception in the UK, who tend to describe themselves as 'solo mums', often face accusations of 'selfishness' for consciously 'depriving' their children of a father, as well as personal conflict around their 'choice' to enter motherhood as a single parent (Ben-Ari & Weinberg-Kurnik, 2007; Golombok, 2015; Mackenzie, 2021; Mendonça, 2018). Research focusing on the experiences of solo mums suggests that these women, like adoptive parents, often form mutually supportive groups who function in much the same way as traditional neighbourhoods, helping solo mums and their children feel like part of 'an associated movement' (Poveda, Jociles, & Rivas, 2014, p. 338; also see Hertz, Jociles, & Rivas, 2016; Malmquist, Björnstam, & Thunholm, 2019). Recent research has suggested that, for solo and single adoptive parents, this kind of support, kinship and community is often forged or supplemented through digital networks (e.g. Hertz et al., 2016; J. J. Miller et al., 2019).

Examining family practice through discourse analysis

Sociolinguists and discourse analysts are well placed to disrupt fixed, essentialist and often damaging normative ideals of family life. Indeed, many have begun to do so, by exploring the specific dimensions and trajectories of family-related actions and practices, and the ways in which these practices relate to wider social structures and institutions. Sociolinguistic studies of couple and nuclear family interactions, for example, have elaborated one dimension of the relationship between family practices, specifically *interactional practices,* and wider social structures. The early sociolinguistic and conversation analytical studies of Fishman (1978) and Ochs and Taylor (1995), for instance, suggest that mundane, everyday interactions between members of the same household are key to the construction, maintenance, negotiation and transformation of gender roles and norms. More recently, Ellece (2012) and Han (2018) have attended to very different sets of family practices, with Ellece (2012) looking at how women's domestic role as child-bearer and nurturer is maintained through the 'Rutu', a ritual ceremonial fertility chant in South Eastern Botswana, and Han (2018, p. 2) examining talk 'directed to an expected and imagined child in utero', or 'belly talk', within U.S. families. Both authors point to the persistence of family practices that are institutionally and/or culturally prescribed and legitimised, occur at transitional points in the dynamics of a family unit, and serve to enact the ties of family and kinship, as well as embodying the roles and responsibilities of parenting. These practices can therefore be seen to represent meaningful ways of both *doing* family, and upholding normative ideals around what *makes* a family, spouse, or parent, and how those roles should be displayed.

Turning to the intersection between family and digital media practices, recent years have seen an acceleration of research interest in the interdisciplinary area of 'motherhood online' (Mackenzie & Zhao, 2021). In our introduction to a special issue on this theme, Zhao and I have argued that

discourse analytical approaches are particularly well suited to explorations of 'the interaction between motherhood as a social construct, mothering as social practice, and online discourse as social action' (Mackenzie & Zhao 2021, p. 2). As evidenced in this special issue, discourse analytical research has been able to critically examine how a wide range of socio-maternal practices and experiences such as infant feeding, maternal regret and postnatal depression can be navigated in and through various digital media such as blogs, online forums, messaging apps and video-sharing platforms. A related strand of research has examined digital media practices within transnational families. Building on research in Media and Cultural Studies that attends to the way digital media practices have impacted, and indeed become part of, family practices and relationships themselves (e.g. Alinejad, 2019; Madianou, 2014; Madianou & Miller, 2012; Wilding, Baldassar, Gamage, Worrell, & Mohamud, 2020), sociolinguistic research in this area has attended to the mediational repertoires of migratory families (e.g. Artamonova & Androutsopoulos, 2020; Lexander & Androutsopoulos, 2021). Some of this work will be further explored in the section that follows, in relation to concepts of *connection* and *intimacy*.

Further, a small but extremely valuable collection of sociolinguistic research has begun to consider how parenting actions and practices can be taken up and recontextualised in parent-to-parent digital interactions. For example, Hanell and Salö's (2017, p. 159) exploration of the Swedish parenting site 'familjeliv' ('family life') shows how users of this site's discussion forum produce parent-related knowledge in a way that 'enable[s] future actions'. To give a specific example, these authors explain how one contributor's post about their use of certain wipes and creams may be taken up by another as a useful 'knowledge resource', which in turn may affect their own childcare practice and consumer choices. In a UK context, Lyons' (2020) study of a WhatsApp chat group comprised of London-based mums, similarly, shows how the individuals in this group drew on the digital affordances of WhatsApp to create of a pool of parenting knowledge and information, which could be shared, stored, and subject to future evaluation, rejection or valorisation. For example, Lyons explains how one participant, Monica, presents her experience of tongue-tie, a condition which limits the flexibility of an infant's tongue and makes it difficult to breastfeed. In a series of WhatsApp messages to the group, Monica presents herself as knowledgeable about the condition, whilst positioning health professionals as under-informed, because of their failure to correctly diagnose it. Another member of the group, Lyons (2020) explains, later draws on Monica's experience to both recognise and seek treatment for her own daughter's tongue-tie.

Whilst this book will elaborate and develop aspects of existing sociolinguistic work around family practice and digital media, it also establishes a new trajectory for research in this area. Most notably, it brings the concept of family practices to the fore in the study of intimate relationships and digital

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media, and examines the complex ways in which digital interactions and family practices intertwine and overlap. Like Hanell and Salö (2017) and Lyons (2020), I seek to trace the trajectories of parents' mediated actions, in terms of the origins of those actions, the ways in which they are mediated and (re)produced, and the future actions they enable. However, I also extend these investigations in several respects: by taking in the affective and collective components of connected parenting alongside its epistemic dimensions, through a more in-depth engagement with participants' broader lives and social networks, and through attention to family practices that go beyond parenting and childcare.

What is connection?

Connection is defined in this book, first and foremost, in terms of shared social ties, affinities or bonds, which can be felt between individuals, between individuals and groups, or even between individuals and objects, places, or concepts. Connections may be experienced as a spark ignited by shared experiences, feelings or perspectives; as a sense of togetherness precipitated by physical or digital co-presence; as a reaching out from one person to another, or as a more vague and sometimes inexplicable sense that a person, thing or place is related to our lives or experiences in important ways. Connections may be fleeting or sustained; they may be triggered by a passing encounter or accrued over time. They may feel significant and intense, or they may be relatively trivial and quickly forgotten. Connections in this sense overlap with related concepts such as affinities, which Mason (2018a, p. 1-2) describes as 'potent connections that rise up and matter', as 'connective charges and energies', and as 'animated or living connections'. Connection is also closely related to the concept of intimacy: as Jamieson (2011, p. 3) suggests, practices of intimacy often work to 'create and sustain a… special quality of close connection', and vice versa. In contemporary cultures and societies, both established and more fleeting connections are often facilitated by and mediated through digital technologies; indeed, the capacity for social connection has frequently been held up as a defining feature of digital and social media (Papacharissi, 2010; van Dijck, 2013).

Social media researchers working across a range of contexts and disciplines have taken particular interest in the modes of intimate connection that can be enabled or enhanced by mobile technologies. For example Chambers (2013), Ito and Okabe (2005), Jamieson (2011) and Madianou (2016) have examined the role digital media can play in generating new ways of defining and practicing intimate connection between romantic, familial and platonic relations. Ito and Okabe (2005, p. 260), in their research with users of Japanese *keitai* (portable device) e-mail, suggest that a special quality of connection can be constructed through regular use of mobile messaging with a small number of close contacts. Examining the continuous stream of mobile messages between a teenage couple, for example, Ito and Okabe (2005, p. 264) show how the pair maintain an 'ongoing

background awareness' of one another, despite their parents' efforts to regulate their intimacy. This kind of ongoing contact, which can range from in-depth chat to lightweight updates about their current activities, sustains the young couple's relationship through what Ito and Okabe (2005, p. 264) call 'ambient virtual co-presence'.

Within transnational families, Alinejad (2019) and Madianou (2016) have explored similar instances of ongoing background connection through digitally mediated 'co-presence'. For example, in Madianou's (2016, p. 199) ethnographic study of UK-based Filipino migrants' communication within their transnational family groups, she suggests that the constant availability of information about family members' activities, as shared through social media practices such as updating a status, checking-in to a geographical location and sharing photographs, can open up 'new ways of being together' and 'doing family'. She defines the 'peripheral, yet intense awareness of distant others' that is made possible through social media and digital affordances as 'ambient co-presence', a concept that is very closely related to Ito and Okabe's (2005) 'ambient virtual co-presence' in its emphasis on sustained, 'background' connections that are maintained primarily through digital channels. Madianou (2016, p. 183) suggests that this form of constant connection can have 'powerful emotional consequences' for familial relationships at a distance. Elaborating on the consequences of such digital 'co-presence' for emotional intimacy between transnational families, Alinejad (2019) has introduced the concept of '*careful* co-presence'. This term reflects the discerning selectivity and emotional care involved in families' intimacy-facilitating social media practices (see further discussion in Chapter 7).

Digital media, however, do not facilitate or enable social connection in any straightforward or neutral way. For example, both Chambers (2013) and Papacharissi (2010, p. 304-5) have suggested that the structure of social network sites such as Facebook, which centre around the 'public display of social connections' are transforming our very sense of what connection and friendship can mean. By encoding all connections as friendships, Chambers (2013, p. 59) suggests, the 'positive qualities of friendship' such as 'conviviality, equality, choice and mutual disclosure' have been used to validate new modes of relationality, such as the public sharing of intimate and personal experiences, and expression of emotional attachment to others. Chambers' (2013) discussion of the way 'friendship' has been exploited by SNSs to encourage intimate sharing and prolonged engagement has parallels in van Dijck's (2013) critique of the way large online media corporations have exploited 'connectivity' as a marketable resource. For example, van Dijck (2013, p. 12) notes that those operating SNSs and other Web 2.0 applications have been keen to emphasise and celebrate their capacity to enhance human-to-human connections in ways that suggest their technologies 'merely enable or facilitate social activities'. However, such claims deliberately overlook and oversimplify the

complex relationship between 'human connectedness' and 'automated connectivity', whereby social media systems do not just facilitate, but also engineer and manipulate human connections, 'coding relationships between people, things, and ideas into algorithms' (van Dijck 2013, p. 12; also see Nieborg & Helmond, 2019).

Further, many explorations of language, digital media, connection and relationships have pointed to the expectation of constant availability that comes with the drive to connect, through mobile phone technologies in particular (e.g. Baron, 2008; Baym, 2010; Gangneux, 2020; Takahashi, 2014). In Takahashi's (2014) exploration of Japanese young people's use of social media in everyday life, for example, she notes that her interviewees have their phones switched on and available at all times, even while they sleep. Research has suggested that this pressure to be always connected - 'always on' (Baron, 2008) - can have troubling consequences for mobile and internet users. Gangneux (2020, p. 464), for example, found that some people reported feeling overwhelmed by 'anxieties and stress generated by mobile messaging applications, ranging from pressure to be always on, expectations to answer quickly and fears of missing out'. Critical histories of social media, such as those offered by van Dijck (2013) and Nieborg and Helmond (2019), remind us that such constant connectivity is engineered by the social media companies who benefit from online sociality. At the same time, users are by no means powerless. Individuals have the agency to 'control the volume' on their mobile and SMS engagement, for example by blocking people and letting calls go to voicemail (Baron, 2008), putting their phones face-down and using message previews to bypass read receipts (Gangneux, 2020). Further, people operating in polymedia environments are able to make meaningful choices around their media use, both through strategic selection of media as appropriate for their social and emotional purposes (Madianou & Miller, 2012), and strategic *dis*-use of particular media, for example by completely abandoning apps that enforce norms of constant availability (see Takahashi, 2014).

This book will acknowledge the structural constraints of digitally mediated connection, attending to the ways in which digital technologies can affect the shape of connections themselves. However, it also adopts a participant-centred perspective that emphasises the agency of individual parents as they connect with others through family practice, and practice family through connection with others. As such, following recent trends in digital media research (e.g. Madianou & Miller, 2012; Papacharissi, 2010; Tagg & Lyons, 2020), I position participants as networked individuals who are able to navigate and manipulate complex and overlapping networks, tools and technologies for a range of social and communicative purposes. This investigation also takes account of participants' broader lives, experiences and social connections as they both intersect with, and exist beyond, their digital practices. Thus, parents' connections are not presumed to begin and end with their digitally

mediated interactions; rather, digital media are treated as components in a much wider network of mediational means through which meaningful connections are constructed and maintained between their friends, families, networks and communities.

The Marginalised Families Online participants

As explained at the beginning of the chapter, this book is based on my research with nine parents who brought children into their lives through adoption, donor conception, surrogacy or non-romantic co-parenting arrangements. This research aimed to explore the role of digital media for parents in diverse family groups, taking account of their broader lives, experiences and social networks. Given these aims, I adopted an in-depth, qualitative approach, working with only nine participants, but interviewing them each three times over the course of eleven months, and collecting a range of their digital media. The interviews, which lasted 105 minutes on average, were spaced at 4-5 month intervals, in order to facilitate the inductive and iterative research process that will be detailed in Chapter 2. Following a long tradition of qualitative, feminist and grounded theory research, the interviewing and data collection process centred participants themselves, prioritising their comfort, listening to them on their own terms, and valuing their unique experience and expertise (see Charmaz, 2014; Mason, 2018b; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; Oakley, 1990).

My call for participants targeted parents who were single and/or LGBT, and who used the internet or mobile technology to connect with others or talk about family life[2]. The call also stated that parents could participate either as individuals or as part of a couple or co-parenting group. Most of the participants who got in touch were single at the time of recruitment, and the coupled or co-parenting individuals decided to participate independently of their partners. Four of the parents were heterosexual, four were lesbian, gay or bisexual, and one preferred not to disclose their sexual identity. No transgender parents volunteered to participate. The nine participants who came forward all had unique family circumstances, but also a good deal in common. Table 1 provides an overview of each individual's demographic information, along with their family circumstances and frequently used digital media. Each participant has been given a pseudonym, and some details (such as where they live, and how old their children are) have been obscured in order to preserve their anonymity. The details that are given, here and throughout this book, were accurate at the mid-point of data collection, 01.05.2019.

Table 1. Participant demographics

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[2] The subheading of the call read 'Are you a single parent, and/or LGBT parent? Do you use the internet or mobile technology to connect with others or talk about family life?'

Name, Age	Ethnicity	Location	Gender & Sexuality	Relationship status	Occupation	Children	Digital media
Rachael, 40	White British	North-West England	Heterosexual cisgender woman	Single	HR services manager & self-employed company director	One infant daughter conceived through sperm donation & intracytoplasmic sperm injections (ICSI)	Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, blogs, podcasts
Laura, 38	White British	East Midlands	Heterosexual cisgender woman	Single	Homelessness officer	One infant son conceived through sperm donation & intrauterine insemination (IUI)	Facebook, WhatsApp
Sarah, 65	White British	South-East England	Bisexual cisgender woman	Recently coupled; parented as a single mum	Retired (former social worker)	One adult son conceived through sperm donation & intrauterine insemination (IUI)	Email
Cheryl, 49	White British	Central North England	Heterosexual cisgender woman	Single; celibate	Secondary school teacher (part-time)	One adopted adult son	Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, blogs
Anna, 41	White Scandi-navian	North-West England	Lesbian cisgender woman	Single (co-parents with ex-wife)	Academic researcher	Two adopted daughters of primary school age	Facebook, WhatsApp
Lynne, 45	White British	Central South England	Cisgender woman (preferred not to disclose her sexuality)	Single; celibate	Full-time parent/carer	Two children; one infant son and one teenage daughter, both adopted	Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger

Jenny, 45	White British	Central North England	Heterosexual cisgender woman	Recently coupled; parented as a single mum	Education advisor at an adoption charity	Two adopted children of primary school age	Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, blogs
Tony, 54	White European	East Midlands	Gay cisgender man	Single (co-parents with lesbian couple)	Self-employed musician and company director	Two sons of secondary school age, conceived through a non-romantic co-parenting arrangement	Facebook, WhatsApp, Messenger
Peter, 29	White British	North-East England	Gay cisgender man	Coupled	Self-employed musician (part-time)	One infant daughter, conceived through egg donation and gestational surrogacy	WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram

As Table 1 shows, all of the participants who took part in the Marginalised Families Online study are cisgender and white, and most identified themselves as British, with the exception of Anna, who migrated to the UK from Scandinavia, and Tony, who was born in the UK but has a French father. Although the call for participants was disseminated across the UK, all participants live in England. At the mid-point in the data collection process (May 1st, 2019), their children were aged between 15 months and 23 years old. Most of the participants became parents in their late thirties or early forties, with two exceptions who became parents in their twenties (Peter and Lynne). Further, all participants can be described very broadly as financially secure, well-educated, and middle-class, although these categories simplify the complexity of their histories and circumstances. For example, whilst Rachael and Peter can be categorised with reasonable confidence as affluent and middle-class, due to their income, education, profession, home ownership and location, other participants such as Laura and Sarah, whilst they are well-educated professionals, nevertheless live in areas where a large percentage of residents (83%) are identified as skilled working-class, working-class, or

not working[3], and which have an above-average rate of unemployment. Laura, further, rents her home and receives state benefits.

These participants were all embedded in complex social networks. They regularly connected with others via at least three different digital platforms, with Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter being the most widely and frequently used. Further, their conversations and interactions often traversed a range of modes, shifting, for example, between WhatsApp messages, telephone calls and face-to-face meetings, depending on the communicative goals and content. These individuals therefore represent a well-connected group of parents who operate in what Madianou and Miller (2012) call polymedia environments, strategically deploying a range of communicative tools and digital technologies in ways that have important implications for their social relationships and family practices. The participants are able to operate confidently in these environments because they have acquired high levels of familiarity, confidence and mastery with digital technologies and systems over many years.

This book's theory of connected parenting is developed through analysis of the interview and digital media data associated with all nine participants involved in the Marginalised Families Online study. From these nine participants, data from six key individuals (Cheryl, Lynne, Rachael, Jenny, Tony and Peter) were selected for closer examination. These parents were chosen because their data was particularly significant in developing a theory of connected parenting, and also because they represented participants' diverse demographics and family circumstances, in terms of their age, gender, sexuality, relationship status, the age of their children, and the means by which they brought children into their lives. Chapter 2 details the research design for this study, including the ethical considerations involved in the research process. Case studies focused on each of these participants form the substantive empirical findings of this book, which are presented in Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8. These chapters offer more detailed introductions to each key participant, before showing how they engage in connected parenting through their social, digital and familial practices.

Chapter summary and overview of the book

This chapter has provided an overview of the book's key aims, concepts and research foundations. In the two chapters that follow, I detail the methodological tools and perspectives that underpin my investigation, explaining how I combined grounded theory and mediated discourse analysis to develop a theory of connected parenting and examine its dimensions through comparative coding and micro-level discourse analysis. Chapter 1 outlines the defining principles and processes of these approaches, explaining what they each bring to my exploration of parenting, families and digital

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[3] Demographics by postcode identified via https://www.postcodearea.co.uk/

media. Chapter 2 extends this methodological discussion through in-depth explanation of the Marginalised Families Online study's research design, from participant recruitment to theory building. At this point, I detail my use of specific grounded theory principles and processes such as an iterative research design, coding, comparative analysis, intensive interviewing and memo writing, and highlight the way core ethical principles are woven through the research process. I bring Chapter 2 to a close by explaining how I expanded and elaborated a grounded theory of connected parenting through close analyses that trace social actions and practices through participants' digital discourse.

In Chapters 3 and 4, I introduce *collective connection* as the first dimension of connected parenting, defined here as the construction and mobilisation of alignments, affiliations and shared practices through mediated actions and texts. Drawing relevant scholarly literature together with interview and digital data from the Marginalised Families Online project, I first consider, in Chapter 3, how collective connection relates to comparable concepts that are well-used in sociolinguistic and social media research, such as alignment, affiliation and collectivisation. I then elaborate this dimension through case studies that focus on the experiences of two heterosexual and voluntarily celibate single adoptive parents, Cheryl and Lynne, who both place high value on their connections with other adoptive parents. Chapter 3 goes on to consider how Cheryl constructs and sustains a sense of collective endeavour and experience through her posts to two private Facebook groups for adoptive parents. Chapter 4 elaborates my exploration of collective connection through a second case study. Here, I show how Lynne constitutes and mobilises shared parenting actions and practices in her interaction with other parents via Meta's *Messenger* app*.*

The second dimension of connected parenting, *epistemic connection,* is examined in Chapters 5 and 6. This dimension, which involves connecting with others through information sharing and knowledge construction, is explored through case studies that focus on Jenny and Rachael, two heterosexual single women who are very well connected and active members of their social networks. In Chapter 5, I place the spotlight on Jenny, who adopted her two children as a single woman. The chapter shows how Jenny maintains epistemic connections with other adopters through the reiteration of shared knowledge, experiences and perspectives on Twitter, and how she mobilises these epistemic connections to appeal for collective action and systemic change. Chapter 6 introduces Rachael, a single woman who conceived her infant daughter with the help of donor insemination and in vitro fertilisation (IVF). Here, I show how Rachael selects moments from her life as a single parent and recontextualises them in the form of share-able knowledge, information and advice through her Instagram posts. Together, these chapters offer an in-depth examination of the ways in which parenting and family actions, events and practices can be made tangible, and thus knowable. They focus on the transformative processes of decontextualisation, entextualisation and

recontextualisation, and the ways in which these processes are mediated by and constructed through digital technologies.

Chapters 7 and 8 examine the final dimension of connected parenting, *affective connection*, which concerns the formation of social ties through the construction and flow of emotions, feelings, moods, dispositions and attitudes. These chapters consider how affective connections can be formed, sustained and mobilised in parents' digital interactions through practices of love, care, intimacy and affection. This dimension of connected parenting is examined, as in the previous chapters, through two case studies. The first, which is presented in Chapter 7, focuses on Tony, a single gay man who co-parents two sons with a lesbian couple. Looking at his online engagement with the UK Fae Revolutionaries, a community of practice that he describes as his 'queer family', I show how Tony mediates affective practices of love, care, intimacy and affection in his posts to their Facebook group, with particular attention to the entextualisation of affective actions such as hugs and kisses, as well as caring practices of love, support and healing. The second case study, which is the subject of Chapter 8, focuses on Peter, a partnered gay man who conceived his infant daughter with the assistance of an egg donor and gestational surrogate. Looking at Peter's dyadic interactions with two of his closest friends via the mobile messaging platform *WhatsApp,* I examine the affective practices through which he sustains intimate, caring and affectionate connections.

Chapters 7 and 8 play an important role in expanding the book's discussion of connected parenting beyond a focus on parent-child relationships and parenting practice. Their analyses re-emphasise the relevance of *family practices* in understanding digitally mediated connection, highlighting links and overlaps between the practices of care that can constitute nuclear family groups, and those same practices as they operate in other close-knit and supportive groups that are built around care, intimacy and affection, including 'chosen' families, friendship groups and online communities. These chapters' discussion of affective connection therefore points to the relevance of connected parenting beyond parent-focused communities, showing that the concept can also be used to explore a range of mediated relationships and groups.

In Chapter 9, I begin by drawing together the book's empirical findings in a comprehensive appraisal of collective connection, epistemic connection and affective connection as they intersect in the connected parenting nexus of practice. The chapter then discusses some of the book's key contributions and implications. First, I consider what it reveals about new ways of 'doing' family in a digital and networked age. Here, I emphasise the point that connected parenting is not a fixed concept: it can take multiple and varied forms, depending on an individual's history, circumstances and sense of self. I also foreground the socio-emotional benefits of connected parenting, in terms of

individuals' access to connections that can be intimate, supportive, and sometimes transformational. Despite these optimistic findings, I also suggest that my analysis of connected parenting points to a need for critical caution. For example, I argue that the potentials and possibilities of digital connection can support and sustain a shift of responsibility, from state and institution to individuals and small communities. Further, I suggest that this shift favours those who already have significant resources at their disposal to manage the demands and challenges of raising their families differently, whilst leaving others under-resourced and vulnerable. I then turn to the book's methodological contributions, emphasising the value of combining grounded theory and mediated discourse analysis in investigations of digital media and family practice, as well as in sociolinguistic research more generally. Finally, I outline the book's implications for institutional family policy, priorities and guidelines. For example, I emphasise the point that over-reliance on digital networks and support may be in danger of masking, but not resolving, problems faced by specific groups such as single adopters, and call for better understanding and acknowledgement of the multiple forms family can take, and the diverse family practices they involve.