Humans Raising Humans? Technology, Community, and the Depoliticization of Parents

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INTRODUCTION

In the traditional, Western understanding of raising children, being a parent has a representational dimension: parents unavoidably represent the socio-cultural meanings that shape their lives and into which they introduce their children. Upbringing, then, is always a political event. That is: (1) in raising their children parents lead them towards a public or communal life; (2) in doing so, parents make choices when representing the world (take sides, be partial, give consent, utter dissent); and (3) parental representations of socio-cultural meanings can be contested by others, not least by their own children, which puts the nature of the collectivity or community at stake. Here, we address one aspect of how this picture of *pedagogical representation* with its political dimensions is being radically transformed by focusing on a relatively recent addition to the field of parenting advice: parenting apps.

In her 2017 Keynote (to which the title of this article refers), Stephanie Mackler voices concerns about how the technical approach to childrearing obfuscates essential aspects of being a parent, in particular the possibility of reconceiving the world the parent represents in response to the disruption of it posed by the child.[1] Like Mackler, our understanding of raising children here derives from Hannah Arendt, and from Klaus

Mollenhauer: it is an intergenerational relationship, in which the parent is a pedagogical figure with (political) responsibility for representing the world to the next generation.[2]

In focusing on the implications of digital apps for this relationship, we do not seek to present a negative account of the pedagogical implications of technology per se. Rather, we address parenting apps as a further development of the reconstitution of the parent-child relationship with implications for its political and pedagogical dimensions, and in view of the implications of the particular affordances of digital technologies for our subjectivity.[3]

We begin with an overview of some common features of parenting apps, which we then situate within the existing parenting culture. We then identify the distinctiveness of parenting apps in relation to understanding the parent-child relationship as an intergenerational relationship. We argue that parenting apps are not merely an intensification of existing (analogue) technologies of parenting (such as manuals, forums, face-to-face contact with parenting experts), but that they further problematize the understanding of the parent as pedagogical/political figure.[4]

WHAT CAN AN APP DO FOR ME?

An exhaustive account of the diverse range of apps available is impossible; here we summarize some common features. The description below refers to Baby Manager, Vroom, Parenting Challenge, Parentune, Wachanga, and Wonder Weeks.[5]

In general, these apps offer advice, e.g., on feeding, exercise and nutrition during and after pregnancy, dealing with familiar parenting challenges. They provide functions, e.g., a feed timer, tasks for your baby to complete, stimulating activities to assist with the child's development.

The advice and activities are generated by information provided by the user: minimally, the child's date of birth or the month of pregnancy, and the user's selected interests. In some apps, users can add photos, access forum discussions, and seek expert advice. The apps also allow the user to record information, e.g., kicks (during pregnancy), feeds, baths, temperature, weight (mum and baby), height, nappy changes, sleep, steps taken, favourite toys, and so on, to manage more than one child, and to share information with a partner, family members, and other parents. We provide more detail on three specific aspects of the selected apps, related to our concern with *pedagogical representation*: personalization and visualization; reliability and verification; and learning optimization.

Personalization and visualization

By adding personal information (e.g., date of birth) and media (e.g., photos), users receive personalized information and activities. Parentune, for example, offers "well-timed expert parenting advice on your queries related to health and wellness … education and more related areas for your child," "personalized as per their child's age and related topics of interest." The information and advice given derives from specific fields, as illustrated by Parenting Challenge – "Here you can also read about positive parenting techniques and child development" – and Wonder Weeks, which offers "a handy reminder for new parents that when their baby's brain is changing, or 'leaping,' the baby is making a significant advance in mental development."

The information is not only in the form of personalized "recommendations for physical development" (Wachanga) or information to enable you to learn "how to be a brain builder" (Vroom), but also visual illustrations of this: timelines of events and images. Baby Manager enables you to: "Visualize trends and routines of your baby with the timeline."

It provides: "Friendly charts [to] help you understand your child and breastfeeding better, gaining insights into their trends." Wonder Weeks provides "a personalized daily calendar of your baby's development that will keep you informed about the (mental) leaps and bounds and the fussy phases of your baby – any time of day or night." Vroom gives "a glimpse at all that's taking place inside your baby's brain!"

Reliability and verification

A number of apps emphasize the reliability and veracity of the information and advice given. Parentune describes the app's content as "reliable," "verified," "trustworthy," "tried and tested," "validated," and "vetted." Parenting Challenge, an app that provides a daily quiz for parents, does so to "test your knowledge and preconceptions and see if they're correct," so you can "be sure that you have the right knowledge to raise your kids. If you answer incorrectly, you will learn the facts about child development that will give you ideas about the best way for raising children." Vroom offers specific information about where the knowledge comes from: "Vroom was developed by a group of dedicated scientists, community leaders, and trusted brands, with input from community orga-nizations and families like yours"; "Leaders in neuroscience, psychology, behavioral economics, parenting, and early childhood development are our trusted collaborators."

Learning optimization for the individual and the community

Many apps, then, support the enhancement of the child's devel-opment, which relies on the ongoing learning of the parent. Parenting Challenge states: "Spend one minute a day on this app and improve your parenting skills." Parenting in this example is a challenge to be overcome,

in which parents are competing with each other: "test your ability to crack everyday parenting conflicts while trying to give you a comprehensive understanding of child behaviour. Try answering common parenting questions, find your score and challenge other parents." Vroom's brain-based approach means that: "By knowing what is going on inside the head of your baby, you can help him to make the leap more easily and stimulate his development."

But next to this focus on the individual (child, parent), the function of "sharing," common across social media, is expressed in terms of belonging to a community of users. As Parentune states, you can "connect with like-minded parents," describing itself as "a rapidly growing pro-parent community." Users can: "Connect with parents going through the same stages of parenting" and "be in sync with your fellow parents." Vroom states: "Together we can build an early learning nation." In view of the need to "improve your parenting skills" (Parenting Challenge) and "Improve your parental level!" (Wachanga), the apps enable users to "interact with experts" "to make your experience better." Thus, the apps serve both individual learning needs and shared needs of the parenting community.

PARENTING APPS AND TODAY'S PARENTING CULTURE

From this overview, we can see many of the features that have been identified in the "parenting culture" more generally.[6] Parenting apps can be seen as digital extensions of analogue parenting technologies, e.g., parenting manuals, websites (e.g., https://www.mumsnet.com/), TV series (e.g., *Supernanny*), or face-to-face advice from parenting experts. With their focus on providing advice, addressing parents in their capacity to learn and implement the knowledge provided, parenting apps underscore the idea, critiqued by a number of scholars, that parents, today, are assumed

to be in need of education and need to professionalize themselves.[7] The predominant discourse sees parents primarily in their capacity as responsible, learning subjects, or "the responsibilized parent," one who sees the need for learning in order to be able to raise her children correctly (i.e., according to the latest scientific findings).[8] Like analogue technologies, parenting apps address parents as requiring knowledge, skills, and strategies to improve their parenting and thus their child's development and behaviour. The sense that "raising children isn't easy" is presented as a matter of (lacking) knowledge: parenting is a challenging task that can be tackled by acquiring the right knowledge, which these technologies can provide. Seen in terms of current analyses of governance, the parent is an instantiation of the "ecological-environmental" self, oriented not by past and future but by present conditions and needs to which she must continually adapt.[9]

As the overview indicated, the knowledge on which the information and advice in the apps is based derives from development psychology, positive psychology, and neuroscience. In this sense, then, these apps are a further example of the "psychologization" and "neurologization" of our everyday lives.[10] Both processes refer to the ways in which the (neuro) psychological discourses have altered the discursive positions of the subject since late modernity. (Neuro)psychologization refers to fundamental changes in how we think and speak about ourselves and others today, and thus how we relate to others, including our children. In the parenting apps, the parent's attention is focused on their children's development ("stages," "milestones," "brain building moments"), and thus what it means to be a parent is confined, located only in behavioural and causal terms, in one-to-one "parent-child" interactions. What it is advisable, and makes sense, to do as a parent is delimited. One app (Vroom) explicitly voices this in neuropsychological language: parents are "brain builder[s]." This illustrates what Jan MacVarish critically analyzes as "neuroparenting,"

the governance of parents on the basis of neuropsychological research.[11] Neuroscience tells us what parents need to do in order to ensure the right wiring of their children's brains.

This leads to the criticism that the parenting culture constitutes a *politicization* of parenting, i.e., parenting is used and misused as a tool for social policy.[12] The parenting discourse entails the evidence-based assertion that if parents use the correct parenting techniques, numerous problems can be prevented and their children will be set on a pathway to a happy, successful future. The mobilization of parents around the signifier "brain" is particularly powerful; who wouldn't want their children to develop optimally?

Parenting apps, then, reinforce, the instrumental approach to the parent-child relationship, internal to the scientized, governmentalized parenting culture.[13] What it means to raise children, then, is determined from outside, i.e., from within a scientific discourse, by which parents are reduced to – but responsibilized as – instruments in the realization of their children's optimal development. Parents' pivotal role in this is to ensure that they acquire the right techniques to enable them to perform their tasks as effectively as possible. Parenting apps, as discussed here, provide an individualizable solution to this need for knowledge. What parents need to know and strive for is contained in the app as a body of knowledge; the app offers personalized advice to help them to go from one milestone to the next and, thus, presents itself as an effective means to achieve externally defined ends.

THE DISTINCTIVENESS OF PARENTING APPS

While existing analyses of this "parenting culture" provide important criticisms of how the parent is constituted and understood today,

arguably, politicization as such is not a problem for a conception of the parent as a figure of pedagogical representation. The issue, rather, is that "parenting" itself entails that parents' political role is oriented towards something other than raising their children (e.g., the economy; optimal future learning outcomes). What does problematize the pedagogical representation of the world by the parent is, rather, a *de*politicization. In today's parenting culture there is hardly space to discuss what it means to raise children, what the ends of childrearing are. The question is closed down by its external (scientific) definition (or doesn't arise). It is here that parenting apps show their distinctiveness in today's parenting culture. They do not just affect an intensification of existing modes of governing parents. They actively reveal what is at stake in the parent-child relationship as an intergenerational relationship: the representational role of parents, their possibility to dissent and to be contested by others. We now return to the three aspects described earlier and, in view of the concern for depoliticization, to the three aspects of the political stated in the introduction.

Personalization and visualization as technologies of responsibilization

As technologies of parenting, there is a crucial distinction between the analogue and the digital. The introduction of apps marks a shift from *generalized* advice offered by books and websites, and from personal advice in a face-to-face meeting with an expert, to the possibility of *personalized* content, based on the individual parent's and child's inputted data. From the moment of conception onwards, users can enter a variety of details: quantitative data on their physical (e.g., blood pressure, number of kicks felt) and temporal (e.g., due date, first steps) experiences; qualitative data on e.g., emotions; or visual media (e.g., ultrasound scans, photos). They (and their child) can complete age-related tasks or respond to quizzes.

This data-based relationship between user and app constitutes an active feedback loop. Each activity enables the further tailoring of information and resources for the parent, thus constituting this ongoing feedback loop.[14]

While advice from books and web forums is also perhaps "personalizable" (c.q., parents interpreting generalized advice for their own personal context), as is advice received in a meeting with an expert (e.g., the professional asking for specificities of the home context), this personalization comes after reading the book, or meeting with a professional. In a parenting app, by contrast, personalization is built into the technology itself. An app relies on the provision of data not only to generate the personalized content for the user (as an outcome of entering data), but also, and crucially, because an app only works through the personalization enabled in its design. This personalization in (parenting) apps is realized both through static data (user information entered when subscribing) and dynamic data (such as online behavior and behavioral data records). The directness of the input/feedback loop generated in the interplay between data and software protocols, and the continuousness of that bi-directional process, make the digital app distinctive from its analogue counterparts, in terms of the relationship of the user to it. What is made visible to parents is, essentially, themselves and their children. Contrary to analogue technologies, parents are not shown a statistically average parent or child, which they then apply to their context; they are, effectively, presented with (a processed, personalized version of) themselves. The technology itself, then, is not only a conduit for information but also selects that information in a particular way based on individual data. Personalization, in this sense, is a mechanism of "responsibilization," that relationship of the self to the self in which individuals understand themselves in terms of learning needs for self-optimization.[15] The design of the app orients parents to those parts of themselves they want to work on.

Visualization is a central facet of this personalized relationship between user and app and a further mechanism of responsibilization. As indicated above, many apps provide parents with visualizations of trends and routines in their children's developmental progress. Such in-app graphics and timelines differ fundamentally from those offered in books and on forums. Whereas the latter are static, in need of interpretation and application to the specific context, in-app graphics and timelines are derived from the data provided by the user and thus only exist because of the feedback loop co-constituted by parents. As with personalization itself, the visualization of one's child's life and one's own performance is internal to the functioning of the app and inherent to the mechanisms of responsibilization. Again, what parents see is not a representation to be applied (or not), but a version of themselves.

Community of parents

Apps, then, make visible a personalized, curated version of the user as "parent." The user is enclosed within a permanent feedback loop, which, in the apps' terms is a benefit of being part of their community. Parenting apps constitute a particular kind of community, we suggest: an ecological data-based community.[16] In an ecological self-understanding, parent and child are no longer situated within an institution (c.q., the family), itself located in a community at large, but rather are oriented in an environment of challenges and learning opportunities. Both parents and children, then, are no longer asked (required) to relate to the historically embedded political community to which they inevitably belong as human beings. If, in this context, raising children is a matter of proper (neuro) developmental stimulation, of producing the correct effects, then, in an ecological self-understanding, there seems no need for a past ("tradition") and its inherited (and, always in principle, contestable) truths, values, and

norms. Nor is there a need for educators (parents, teachers) as "living ancestors" who time and again re-embody "experience accumulated across many generations" and invite their children to partake "in the shared experience of exploring a common world."[17]

Rather, without reference to or debate on, cultural, public norms and values, apps enable parents to navigate a permanently shifting distance between "who they are now" (based on the data entered) and "who they can become" (through the visualization of the next milestone to be achieved, the next strategy to implement) in what can be called a "space of equivalence": what makes a parent the person she is, is bracketed out of the picture. Community, here, consists of "like-minded" parents who can and should be measurable according to the same performance criteria.[18]

What it means to care, to be responsible, is recast in "brain-building" or otherwise development-enhancing terms, oriented by comparison with one's previous or others' performance. As seen in the description of some of the apps, comparison is explicitly invited. What is at stake for parents (and their children) in such an ecological data-based community, then, is the question of whether or not they have, as of yet, achieved the best they can, optimized their learning potential, and registered this to make it visible to themselves and others (within the app community). The data-based self and community are put at stake not by the possibility of disagreement but by not making themselves visible.

In a parenting app, possibilities for dissent are limited, if present at all. It may seem obvious to say that this is because, in the app, there is, largely, no one to talk to and so to disagree with. Also, the point arguably also applies to analogue technologies: parents cannot compete with experts on their own grounds. In apps, however, the knowledge provided is knowledge in which the parent is already involved (via feedback loops) and has, in this sense, tacitly given her approval by subscription to the app.

Subscription (i.e., sign up/installation) is our consent to online community. The ecological data-based community of parents enables comparison in view of optimization, not contestation in view of renewal. This is not to make a value judgment between online and offline communities or to imply that the former is inherently apolitical. Rather, the latter sense of community is at issue here in view of the (sidelined, delimited) political, representational role of the parent as a pedagogical figure.

What it makes sense to say

As indicated above, while the apps do resemble analogue technologies in terms of the source of the knowledge they provide (developmental psychology, neuropsychology), they differ in the fact that this knowledge is built in to their design: apps are crucially different from books and advice from parenting experts in that what is presented to parents is generated through the feedback loop interaction, through the very interplay of (static and dynamic) data entered. This internality enters the parents in to a significantly different relationship to the available expertise and affects the very claims parents can make.

In an ecological data-based community, what can be meaningfully "said" are claims that can be entered as data that fit the existing categories supplied by the app; claims not about belief or moral judgment but that fulfil the criteria to register achievement of the next milestone or user-determined target. These are not claims about the world, i.e., about what a parent wants to stand for or (re)present to her children, claims that are interwoven with the dynamic context of her own life, claims for which she can thus be called on to justify, that ultimately, when rejected, affect a parent in her very existence as a human being. An ecological data-based community effects, by design, a certain disconnection from the realm of cultural norms and values. Criteria for understanding and

norms for action exist only *within* the feedback loop into which parents enter. The normativity, that is, is inherent to the system.[19]

A similar argument has been made of analogue technologies of parenting. Nancy Vansieleghem, for example, argues that "parental services (technologies) and monitoring systems" create their own "sovereign structure," which is no longer related to "social and cultural norms."[20] But Vansieleghem may be overstating her case. The analogue technologies she discusses – instrumentalized and thereby impoverished as they may be – nevertheless still operate against a backdrop of moral and evaluative judgements. While they carry normative assumptions about what it means to be human, a child, and so on, they can still be understood as separate from the parent, and as something s/he can take a critical stance in relation to. Her argument holds, however, we argue, for parenting apps: here the normativity *is* effectively generated *in* and *by* the system. It is this disconnection from the realm of norms and values that affects a form of depoliticization of the figure of the parent.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of parenting apps is not simply an intensification of processes that characterize the current mode of governance, e.g., responsibilization, scientization, neurologization. We suggest this for two reasons: 1) the ubiquity of the digital in our day to day lives requires consideration at an ontological level, not just as a further instantiation of a particular discourse or mode of subjectivation; 2) the parent-child relationship is a distinct pedagogical relationship, the existential distinctiveness of which is overlooked both by (a) external scientific definitions and (b) critical concern with the production of different parental subjects. Our analysis of parenting apps begins to articulate what is distinct about the digital in the constitution of the parent-child relationship. It goes to

the heart of the parent-child relationship: pedagogical representation.

In drawing attention to depoliticization as one feature of this constitution, we suggest, in conclusion, and tentatively, that it effects a *dis*positioning of parents. The emphasis on personalization in the parenting apps discussed is not, it seems, a reference to persons as persons. What matters is not the person of the parent, what she stands for, what she finds herself representative of, but whether what she does leads to the app-generated outcomes. The discourse of personalization goes hand in hand with a de-personalizing effect, upheld in the space of equivalence. Parents here are, as indicated, "like-minded."

To return to Mackler, the technologization of parenting overlooks the very real experience of the child's disruption of our sense of how things should be. Without political community, in the sense of a common world in which to make sense of this, such disruption becomes an individual learning issue, for which apps offer a solution.

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1 Stephanie Mackler, "Raising a Human: An Arendtian Inquiry into Child-Rearing in a Technological Era," Keynote Address, PES Conference March 2017.
2 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin, 2006); Klaus Mollenhauer, *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing,* trans. Norm Friesen, ed., (London and New York: Routledge, 2014).
3 See also Amanda Fulford, Naomi Hodgson, Anna Kouppanou, and Joris Vlieghe (2016) "Technologies of Reading and Writing: Transformation and Subjectivation in Digital Times" in "Symposium: Technologies of Reading and Writing," Amanda Fulford, Naomi Hodgson, Anna Kouppanou, and Joris Vlieghe, eds., *Educational Theory* 66, no. 4 (2016): 435-440.
4 We distinguish between analogue and digital technologies, to refer to books, tv shows, web forums on the one hand, and mobile digital applications, on the other. While web forums might be considered digital technologies, we argue that apps function in a particular way, based on web 2.0 and semantic capabilities, with distinctive implications for the constitution of the parent-child relationship. In this preliminary enquiry, then, web forums are classed as analogue.
5 All last accessed 30th October 2017. Baby Manager: https://goo.gl/4kVbt2;

Vroom: http://www.joinvroom.org/; Parenting Challenge: https://goo.gl/7c6rzU; Parentune: https://goo.gl/4yVCzM; Wachanga: https://goo.gl/VbgzTH; Wonder Weeks: https://goo.gl/x96u11.

6 The critical literature on this is now extensive. A representative survey, however, falls beyond the scope of this article. We limit ourselves to recognizing only some of the critical work on the most salient trends in this parenting culture.

7 See e.g. Ellie Lee, Jennie Bristow, Charlotte Faircloth, and Jan Macvarish, *Parenting Culture Studies* (London: Palgrave, 2014); Frank Furedi, *Paranoid Parenting: Why Ignoring the Experts May be Best for Your Child* (London: Continuum Press, 2008); Stefan Ramaekers and Judith Suissa, *The Claims of Parenting: Reasons, Responsibility and Society* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2012).

8 See e.g., Magnus Dahlstedt and Andreas Fejes, "Family Makeover: Coaching, Confession and Parental Responsibility," *Pedagogy, Culture and Society* 22, no. 2 (2014): 169-188.

9 See e.g., Maarten Simons and Jan Masschelein, "From Schools to Learning Environments: The Dark Side of Being Exceptional," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 42, no. 3-4 (2008): 687-704; Maarten Simons and Naomi Hodgson, "Learned Voices of European Citizens: from governmental to political subjectivation," *Teoría de la Educación* 24 no. 1 (2012): 19-40.

10 e.g., Jan De Vos, *Psychologisation in Times of Globalisation* (Hove: Routledge, 2012); Jan De Vos, *The Metamorphoses of the Brain: Neurologisation and its Discontents* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

11 Jan MacVarish, *Neuroparenting: The Expert Invasion of Family Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

12 Cf. Furedi, *Paranoid Parenting*; Lee et al., *Parenting Culture Studies*.

13 Ramaekers and Suissa, *The Claims of Parenting*; Paul McIlvenny, "A Home Away from Home: Mediating Parentcraft and Domestic Space in a Reality TV Parenting Program," *Home Cultures: The Journal of Architecture, Design and Domestic Space* 5, no. 2 (2008): 141-166; Mackler, "Raising a Human."

14 For further analysis on the role of feedback in governance, see: Maarten Simons, "'To be Informed': Understanding the Role of Feedback Information for Flemish/European Policy," *Journal of Education Policy* 22, no. 5 (2007): 531-548.

15 Maarten Simons, "Governing Education without Reform: The Power of the Example," *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 36, no. 5 (2015): 712-731, 722.

16 We draw here on: Maarten Simons, "Governing Education without Reform."

17 Bernard Stiegler, *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2010), 7; R. S. Peters, *Ethics and Education* (Abingdon: Routledge Revivals, 2015), 53.

18 Simons, "Governing Education without Reform."

19 Cf. Simons, "Governing Education without Reform."

20 Nancy Vansieleghem, "The Residual Parent to Come: On the Need for Parental Expertise and Advice," *Educational Theory* 60, no. 3 (2010): 354, 341.