

When I was first invited to write an article to accompany this special issue, the weeks ahead brimmed with potential. I would draw on the notion of relationality as discussed and developed by Sasha Roseneil, Andrea Doucet and others to reflect on my newly started research project that examines the intersectional politics of parental leave. If we take the relational to mean an approach that foregrounds how people's "'sense of self' is 'constructed *in relationships with others, and in relation to others and to social norms*'" (May, 2011, p. 5 cited in Roseneil & Ketokivi, 2016, p. 145), its value for understanding parenting, family and the state apparatuses developed to manage them (such as parental leave policies) is self-evident. The ideal of 'good parenting' upon which many childrearing-related policies are made and against which many parents judge themselves, is constructed always *in relation to children* (and what will best serve their needs), *in relationships between mothers and fathers* and, on a macro level, *between parenting households and wider society*. The choices that parents make are the complex result of negotiation with each other and in response to specific constraints, places and moments in time. Parenting choices respond, too, to shifts in regulations, policy revisions and changes that rest on assumptions about what parents do and how they do it. My plan was to attend to what such policies elide, to focus particularly on the raced, gendered and classed model of citizenship and parenthood that underlies parental leave<sup>1</sup> in contemporary Britain.

Even more apt, the theoretical framework and methodology through which I planned to examine parental leave is black feminist theory and intersectionality, a theoretical and political approach that is fundamentally relational. Black feminist theory begins from the experiences of the marginalised, foregrounding the intersection of racism, sexism and capitalism as structures that both constrain black women's lives and generate resistance (Collins, 2000; Combahee River Collective, 1977). Attention to this dynamic is one of the defining features of black feminist scholarship and inspires a methodological approach that views research as co-creation and centres reflexivity. Black feminist theory attends to the particularities of individual experience while always situating those experiences in larger structures of power. Black feminist theory centres the marginalised and explicitly names racism, alongside sexism, heteronormativity and capitalism, as encompassing a matrix of domination that structures all social relations (Collins, 2000; Nash, 2019).

Those *were* my plans. But the promise of early February and the carefully constructed fieldwork arrangements developed for such a project were soon thrown into disarray by the arrival of COVID-19. Like everyone else, my 2020 plans were scuppered and had to be hastily redrawn to meet the complicated, ever changing and often contradictory needs of our timid new world. Furthermore, the urgency of race-conscious and race-*critical* analysis was brought into sharp relief by the reignition of the global Black Lives Matter movement. Though it was sparked by the viral film of a Minnesota police officer killing George Floyd in late May, Floyd's death was the latest among the many traumas that seemed to flood and punctuate the first half of 2020. There was the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, a young African-American man who was killed while jogging in February but whose accused murderers were only arrested in May, after global outcry. And closer to home, there were reports of the

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<sup>1</sup> I use 'parental leave' as a catchall term to encompass the various options available to parents in the UK including maternity leave, paternity leave, unpaid parental leave and shared parental leave.

disproportionate impact that COVID-19 was having on Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups from as early as April.

Suddenly, the context in which I would carry out this research was utterly transformed, not only by a new viral illness but by the old, enduring inequalities the illness exposed. In this article, my aim is to meditate on this moment, to draw connections between relationality and black feminist theory and to harness the strategies and tools they might offer; a praxis for living and being *in* the world as well as changing it. In particular, I will use my project as a lens through which to discover what intellectual and methodological possibilities a relational approach might offer, especially as I carry out research in a post-COVID-19 world, a world in which black lives appear to matter.

### *Parental Leave in the UK: An intersectional analysis*

Let me begin by describing the project. My research focuses on the development of parental leave policies in the UK. I use an intersectional framework to examine the design, implementation and take-up of maternity, paternity and shared parental leave policies as they have been developed since the 1970s. The aim is to place these policies in their wider context; what can their formation tell us about what the state defines as 'good' parenting? And how are these ideas shaped by race, class and gender politics? I situate parental leave policies within the wider parenting culture that identifies childrearing as an essential tool in the production of an economically prosperous society and imagines parents as uniquely responsible for raising productive citizens. While scholars in the burgeoning field of parenting culture studies have already identified the gendered and classed dimensions of contemporary parenting culture, its raced effects have attracted less attention. In this project, I use an intersectional theoretical framework to attend to how class, gender *and* race informs which parents are marked as responsible and what kinds of childrearing practices are praised as appropriate.

The name given to the time set aside by states and employers for caring for newly born (or newly adopted) children provides a small glimpse into how childrearing is understood and valued at a particular socio-historical moment (Baird & O'Brien, 2015). Whether 'maternity', 'paternity' or 'parental' leave, the name of this legislation suggests which parent (and as I argue, which *type* of parent) is imagined as best-suited to taking on early childcare responsibilities. In the UK, while parents may take maternity leave, paternity leave, shared parental leave or unpaid parental leave, each with its own distinct entitlements and requirements for eligibility, maternity leave offers the largest and most well-remunerated share of leave. Current legislation provides mothers up to 52 weeks of leave with the first six weeks paid at 90% of their previous wage and a further 33 weeks paid at a flat rate of £151.20 per week (less than a third of the average weekly wage in the UK, pre-COVID-19). Maternity leave is also the source of the new but poorly taken up shared parental leave: mothers are required to transfer their unused leave, thereby transforming maternity leave into shared parental leave. Thus, even as the legislative framework gestures towards equal parenting, in practice, leave remains maternalist in its orientation, prioritising women's access to paid time off for early childrearing. Building on these overtly gendered dimensions, my research brings into view the classed and raced implications of arranging parental leave policies in this manner. My aim is to draw such policies back to their context,

to the specific socio-political relations that govern their development and shape their take-up.

The project has two components. The first is a discursive analysis of parental leave policy development in the UK since the early 1970s. Beginning with the Employment Protection Act of 1975, which introduced six weeks of maternity pay and 29 weeks of leave, to the most recent Children and Families Act of 2014, this analysis examines not only the text of the different pieces of legislation but the discussions and debates that accompany the introduction of new policies as they appear in House of Commons proceedings, consultations, impact assessments, articles and opinions pieces in broadsheet and tabloid newspapers and the wider media. There is a large body of scholarship that has examined this policy area, especially more recent changes in the parental leave policy landscape. Beginning with Additional Paternity Leave in 2010 and Shared Parental Leave in 2015, successive governments have seemingly expanded fathers' rights to leave as part of a broader attempt to both increase fathers' participation in early childcare and prolong women workers' attachment to the labour market. Recent research in this arena has attended to this complex, relational dance between fathers' caring and mothers' working, including the work presented in this special issue (see for example, Twamley, this issue). My work suggests another layer of analysis, drawing links between gendered divisions of labour as promoted by the state and the raced and classed consequences of explicitly aiming to reduce "state interference" in relationships between workers and their employers (Department for Business Innovation and Skills, 2013).

### *Doing parental leave*

To understand the lived realities of the intersection of race, gender and class in the take-up of parental leave, the second part of my project interviews black parents who have recently begun or are about to begin caring for young babies. While I am still only in the early stages of data collection, interviews completed thus far bring into sharp relief how policies constrain (or encourage) particular practices of childrearing and therefore particular relations between mothers and fathers and between parents and their employers.

Take David and his wife Nicola, for example. In separate interviews with the couple, both described a desire to share infant care equally. At the time of their interviews, their baby was not yet born and so much of the discussion about infant care was hypothetical. Nicola recalled seeing her own parents model an equitable division of labour during her childhood and wanted to replicate that in her own relationship. Reflecting on conversations he'd had with male friends who had recently become parents, David explained that his goal was for Nicola to feel completely comfortable leaving their child in his sole care. However, despite these ambitions, other factors (such as their prioritisation of breastfeeding, the wage gap in the relationship and their different working patterns) meant that the possibility of David taking shared parental leave was only briefly considered before it was dismissed as impractical, both in terms of idealised infant care and its financial implications.

Such a decision is backed up by policy; David is only entitled to statutory paternity pay during his two weeks of paternity leave which, given his high salary and status as higher earner in the family, amounts to a significant pay cut. Because David's job will be prioritised,

infant care decisions such as who will wake for night feedings are already made, reinforced by well-paid maternity leave. The pandemic has also impacted David and Nicola's plans and has the potential to alter established routines. David will be working from home for the foreseeable future and expects to take on a greater share of childcare when Nicola returns to work but he will be assisted by grandparents, leaving little prospect for taking leave alone, a key intervention for disrupting gendered patterns in childcare (Doucet, 2017). Indeed, when I raised the possibility of taking leave alone, David responded: "My first thought was why would I? Why would I take paternity leave on my own?"

At first glance, the conclusions that can be drawn from my interviews with David and Nicola adhere quite neatly to previous scholarship on parental leave in the UK. Even among couples vocally committed to gender equality in their households and parenting intentions, the gendered politics of parental leave policies, wage gaps and parenting culture intrinsically shape their experience of parenting and decisions made in the early years of their child's life. The relational frame provides an insightful way to attend to the emotional, social and political contexts of parental decision-making. Gendered relations are clearly at play in David and Nicola's narratives but how are those relations themselves raced and classed? Can the couple's decision-making around prioritising David's job be better understood when it is framed as a marker of racialised middle-class success? Can we understand David's sense of himself as a father without acknowledging the "well-spoken...persona" he felt required to develop to thrive in his white-dominated industry or the stereotypes about black fatherhood that are pervasive in British society? David and Nicola's leave decisions are framed by this context, by their desire to buy a house in the near future and the consequent need to avoid any significant drops in pay that may compromise a mortgage application.

#### *Methodology, relationality and intersectionality*

To better tap into these relations my original intention was to conduct both joint and separate interviews with parents. As a methodological tool, interviews offer a unique opportunity to hear the relational context that informs people's sense of themselves. Joint interviews, especially, present insightful moments of negotiation as participants choose who will tell what story and whose interpretation of events stands as 'the truth'. Interviews are also fundamentally relational in the sense that the narrative that is generated is a product of both the interviewer and the interviewee(s), a story of self only made legible by the particular arrangements and conventions of the research interview. As many feminist methodologists have argued, interviews are a co-creation (Best, 2003; Oakley, 1981) and their co-productive nature has been made all the more obvious by the constraints of the current circumstances. The pandemic has forced a switch to virtual methods of data collection which has meant that the interactions between and among parents and children that I imagined I would witness as I met research participants in cafes, offices and homes has been replaced by more staid encounters.

This pandemic (and its consequences for research) has highlighted for me the significance of visual interactions. Before my interviews with David and Nicola, participants had opted to have their interviews over the phone where typical opportunities for rapport building have been much less frequent. David, who was first to be interviewed, suggested we talk over Microsoft Teams, a welcome change that enabled a conversation that stretched beyond the

90 minutes we had each set aside for our discussion. I also speculate that using a visual medium such as Teams offers participants what I might call 'racial reassurance', a confidence in me that is inseparable from my blackness and seems especially important for those moments when the interview turns to topics that explicitly address race and racism. There have been hints about the importance of this racial reassurance in previous interviews, such as the participant recruited via Facebook who, when I asked why she took part in the research, answered that she could see that I was black which made her feel more comfortable about participating.

Interviews bring such relations to the fore of analysis. They enable access to stories and narratives as they discuss and explain their decisions, experiences and opinions about the work of caring for young babies. My conversations with mothers and fathers highlight parents' ideas of themselves as works-in-progress, responding to the unpredictable and fluctuating needs of a newborn baby, evolving relationships with spouses and existing children and more pressingly, a changing social context. It is a reflection on this changing social world that I wish to conclude with, especially as it demands precisely the kind of flexibility and dynamism to which a relational approach and an intersectional feminist methodology might be well-suited.

My decision to focus on the infant caring experiences of black parents responds to the gap in parenting culture and parental leave scholarship I described earlier. It centres the lived experiences of a marginalised population of British society and suggests that something new might be gleaned by examining seemingly innocuous policies from the margins. Black feminism, particularly intersectionality, requires this point of view. It begins from the experiences of the marginalised, the very premise of which attends to the (relational) processes by which some groups of people are afforded opportunities and privileges while others are denied them.

What assumptions have policy makers made in their design of parental leave regulations and how are these assumptions managed by parents in different socioeconomic positions? Such a strategy does not assume or assert that all black parents will negotiate parental leave in the same ways, this would deny the diversity of black experience in Britain. Instead, I wish to draw attention to the effects of racism in crafting policy, both in its practical *and* ideological implications. Such an analysis may not reveal the explicit expression of white supremacy in policy-making, but it may uncover the extent to which black and other racialised groups in Britain are disadvantaged by parental leave mechanisms that rest on employment requirements, given the racially stratified labour market in the UK. It may highlight the specifically racial inequities perpetuated by a parental leave system that relies on individual employers to offer competitive parental leave packages, overlooking the discrimination faced by racialised job seekers at the application stage. Ideologically, it may suggest the existence of an imagined ideal beneficiary of parental leave who just happens to be white and middle-class, dismissing the unique experiences and challenges faced by people of colour.

While the work of recognising and challenging structures of racism has always been important and the task of black feminist scholars for over a century, its relevance is brought into view in the current moment. By an apparent sudden awakening to the deadly effects of

racism whether manifested in concentration in occupations most exposed to COVID-19 or the consequences of being subject to greater levels of policing. And yet, even at this moment of heightened public awareness, in a Facebook post inviting black parents to an interview, I was still asked *why* black parents. “Can this be right?” the commenter asked.

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