JOURNAL OF INTEGRATIVE RESEARCH & REFLECTION

Journal of Integrative Research & Reflection

Volume 4 | Spring 2021

ISSN: 2561-8024
journal.IRR@outlook.com | jirr.ca
University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue W, Waterloo, ON N2L 2G1

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Cover Page

Our incredible cover page was designed by Claire Quong from Hong Kong:

> "For the cover I wanted reference Kurt Vonnegut's novel, Cat's Cradle. Free will and our relationship with technology are incredibly relevant to our world right now. I used exclusively red, white and blue to allude to Donald Trump's hateful rhetoric and role in perpetuating Asian hate crimes in the face of a global pandemic.
>
> Thank you for allowing me to contribute to this issue of JIRR! Get vaccinated, kids."

You can find her on instagram: `@QuongSong`

We acknowledge that we work and learn on the traditional territory of the Attawandaron (Neutral), Anishnaabeg, and Haudenosaunee peoples. The University of Waterloo is situated on the Haldimand Tract, land promised and given to Six Nations, which includes six miles on each side of the Grand River.

A Warm Welcome

It is with great pleasure that we present to you our fourth volume of the *Journal of Integrative Research & Reflection*.

This journal cycle presented itself as the most difficult to date; yet, what can be said without hesitation is that our journal is a labour of mental perseverance, teamwork, and an integrity toward providing the unique platform for cross-disciplinary work that undergraduate students deserve.

The veneer that is the COVID-19 pandemic has lain thickly over our heads for nearly two years, and it has invariably shaped this edition. The content – from the superbly imaginative cover art, to the high quality articles presented herein, and in the behind-the-scenes processes of reviewing and publication – have all been impacted by the unexpected twists afforded by a mindless virus that has upended the world in ways not even two world wars could achieve! It is within this context that our fourth volume has taken a more special meaning.

Our group has made it a point to center wellness during this entire cycle. Our weekly meetings served as a place to unwind amongst friends just as much as they provided a space for rich ideas to flourish. Our notions of productivity and efficiency shifted as we took time to listen to one another, over our little computer screens, tell stories of how we were finding ways to stay mentally and physically active in a time where interpersonal engagement was stifled. This journal has proven to be a centerpiece of human connection for all of us at *JIRR*: engaging together as a team as well as with creative authors and dedicated reviewers has highlighted *JIRR*'s mandate as both a physical and abstract space for relationships to bud and ideas to take root.

This year has also afforded us the opportunity to bring into the fold of *JIRR* new editors from across Canada. We are thrilled to have received an enthusiastic response from students wanting to be a part of this journal and continue to foster its growth.

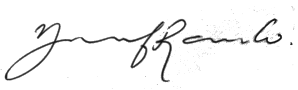
There is no unifying theme for this journal – instead, we encourage the reader to look beyond the superficial connection between articles that is the pandemic, and question how the article topics can and should apply in other contexts. We should challenge ourselves to ask why certain questions have only been asked now. Why do we accept certain subject matter in different times and places? Whose responsibility is it to provide dedicated spaces of critical and uncomfortable inquiry when we are not sensitized to abnormal social conditions? The four articles found within this edition will provide an excellent starting point. These

papers, as well as all of the submissions we received, have prompted us to consider the power of written word, and the difficulty in producing meaningful work. Every time we pick up the pencil, we have a responsibility to contribute to new knowledge, to shape our perspectives of our world, and to share with others so that we may become more inquisitive, understanding, and connected.

Participating in this journal has been the highlight of our undergraduate tenures. We have learned and grown alongside it, and we are humbled by the excitement of the next iteration of the journal management. Allow us to thank our tireless reviewers, patient authors, inspiring mentors, and earnest teammates.

Finally, allow us to thank you, the reader, for sharing in the experience that is the brilliant cross-disciplinary work we have the honour to curate.

With warmest wishes,



Yousuf Ramahi *Maryam Mughal*

JIRR gratefully acknowledges the support of the Department of Knowledge Integration in the production of JIRR. Speacial thanks to Rob Gorbet and to Katie Plaisance for their mentorship and guidance. JIRR also thanks Jordan Hale for helping us to navigate the publishing process. A final thank you to Hannah Anderson, without whom this journal would not have continued to flourish.

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Starbucks and Aristotle: Searching for Civic Friendship in the Coffee Shop

Anna Buhrmann

PICTURE a crowded stone street, thronging with men in togas bartering with each other and discussing the latest political issues of the day. On an adjoining hill, the Parthenon towers imposingly over the road, which is lined with porticos that provide shelter from the blazing Mediterranean sun to olive vendors and philosophers alike. This is the agora, the "place of citizenship", at the center of Aristotle's hometown, Athens (Mitchell [1995], 88).

Athens was a city of "radical democracy", where every adult male citizen participated equally in political decision-making (Sommerstein [2002], xv). To Aristotle, it was essential for the health of a democracy to have "an ethical principle regulating its members' mind and attitudes", especially given that people in such a society would be heterogeneous rather than homogenous in virtue (Hong [2013], 82). Aristotle called this "civic friendship", defining it as goodwill between citizens that generates concord among them, establishing a basis for justice within society that could "hold [it] together" (144). In order to allow for the formation of civic friendships, a democracy needs places for citizens to congregate, and the agora served this function for the Athenians by providing them with a space for social interaction and political activity (Mitchell [1995], 89).

In contrast, many communities today do not feature public spaces as prominently. Sociologist Ray Oldenburg lamented in his 1989 book *The Great Good Place* that adverse urban development was resulting in the vanishing of communal gathering places such as bars and candy stores, leading to a poverty of the "informal public life" that comprised the basis of citizen participation in American democracy (Oldenburg [1989], 10). Oldenburg draws numerous parallels between the ancient and postmodern world by allocating a high degree of importance to the nature of the relationships between people in the same politically governed community. He calls attention to the concept of a "third place", a location that hosts "the regular, voluntary, informal, and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals" apart from home and work, the first and second places (16).

Just prior to the publishing of *The Great Good Place*, a chain of coffee stores in Seattle called Starbucks hired a marketing director named Howard Schultz. While in Italy for a conference, Schultz discovered a social dimension to coffee consumption: whereas Starbucks only sold coffee beans, Italy had espresso bars where people lingered in community as they enjoyed a delicious drink (Plog [2005], 285). Inspired, Schultz converted Starbucks stores into espresso bars when he became its CEO in 1987, and the company grew explosively. Significantly, Schultz notes that Oldenburg's work became an integral part of the company's business strategy, declaring in his 2011 autobiography that Starbucks was a "third place" (Schultz and Gordon [2012], 12). Today, Starbucks has the potential to act as this kind of gathering place in 28,039 locations across seventy-five countries (Starbucks [2018]).

Given the ubiquity of Starbucks, it is worth evaluating the quality of the interactions between individuals that occur in its spaces. Is Starbucks a third place conducive to the formation of civic friendships among its customers? In this essay, I will argue that Starbucks falls short of being an environment that facilitates these interactions. Instead, it offers a com-

mercialized version of community, as evidenced by its marketing strategies and the nature of the constrained discourse within its spaces.

This paper adds to existing discussions of contemporary ways of belonging by examining community in democracies through an Aristotelian lens. Accordingly, I will explore my thesis by drawing on classical philosophy to define civic friendship. I then look to Oldenburg's language surrounding third places to locate characteristics of civic friendship in contemporary contexts. I further rely on the field of sociology for a description of Starbucks and its relationship with its consumer base.

Due to the limited scope of this paper, a few qualifiers are necessary before proceeding. Firstly, a meeting in Starbucks, whether a date or an interview, does not signify an exchange of a civic friendship; instead, it indicates the presence of another kind of social bond because it is a planned interaction. Consequently, civic friendships will be defined as casual and spontaneous interactions between members of the same community who may not be well-acquainted with each other. Furthermore, while it would be fascinating to study the influence of Starbucks on democratic societies on a global scale, this paper will concentrate on the North American context.

To begin, a cornerstone of civic friendship for Aristotle was equality among members of society. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, he states that citizens should have "much in common", and that they are "meant to be equal… so rule is taken in turn, and on equal terms. The same goes, then, for their friendship" (158). Oldenburg describes how a third place helps to actualize this kind of equality by providing an environment that does not have exclusive criteria for membership; instead, its space acts as a "leveler" for people from a wide range of socioeconomic classes. Whereas people typically associate with those who share their socioeconomic status in other settings, third places do not highlight social position, providing the backdrop for the formation of diverse friendships to occur (Oldenburg [1989],24).

In contrast to a third place as envisioned by Oldenburg, Starbucks has called attention to socioeconomic differences from its conception; its success is inseparable from its ability to "automatically [convey] a rise in social status" (Fellner [2008], 25). When Starbucks was in its infancy, coffee consumption was actually in decline across America, and the next generation of college-aged students were showing a preference for soft drinks (Roseberry [1996], 765). Against this backdrop of gloomy prospects, the coffee market was saved by the rising popularity of specialty coffee makers among the aspiring American middle class (Roseberry [1996], 774). Starbucks in particular was successful in courting this group, as evidenced by the fact that their customers are generally college-educated members of the upper-middle class (Haskova et al. [2015], 12). Labour activist Kim Fellner describes the company's growth: "Guided by Schultz's vision, his coffee stores became an 'affordable luxury' …brandishing a Starbucks cup signalled your education, sophistication, and exclusivity, or at least your aspirations to those qualities" (25). One study of Starbucks' product placement in movies found that nearly all characters portrayed as consumers of its products fall between the ages of twenty and fifty and belong to the white middle-class, associating Starbucks with a luxurious lifestyle (Zhang [2011], 78). Clearly, the success of the company is at least partly premised on signifying the superiority of certain citizens over others, a practice antithetical to the elementary principles of civic friendships.

In response, some might argue that a visit to a Starbucks might lead to greater equality by putting citizens of different class backgrounds on the same footing. After all, the ability to walk into a Starbucks and purchase a drink does not depend on a person's socioeconomic status – or does it? The opportunity to join the trendy crowd who frequent these coffee shops is technically not off-limits to anyone, but the costs of membership are much higher in comparison

to those of many other coffee chains. Moreover, ordering a drink at Starbucks requires a degree of specialized knowledge, starting with the company's distinct names for their cup sizes. Acquiring this cultural capital occurs over multiple visits; as such, it is those with the requisite money and time who will become Starbucks insiders, distinguishing them from those outside the shop who cannot afford the habit (Bookman [2013], 67).

Within the shop, then, the opportunity for the formation of civic friendships is limited to a certain group of people, in contrast with a public space that is truly "open to all" (Oldenburg [1989], 24). The variation in the company's geographical accessibility mirrors the distinctions it cultivates between its customers: Starbucks shops generally lie in urban centres with significant upper- and middle-class populations (Gregory [2017]). Although Starbucks recently broadcasted the launch of fifteen stores in low-income communities, that number pales in comparison to the amount of locations regularly opened close to consumers who can afford expensive products (Gregory [2017], Lebeau [2016]). Even if Starbucks shops were to become fixtures in poorer areas, the connotations of wealth curated by the Starbucks brand in these spaces would be unchanged. Visiting these stories still confers a certain desirable status. Consequently, a movement towards relationships defined by true equality among its consumers would be difficult, given that they would still be buying into a product on the basis of the inequality it propagates. In sum, the elevation of certain citizens over others may contribute to the commercial success of Starbucks, but it adversely affects the formation of egalitarian social bonds even before customers enter the shop.

The wish to attain the appearance of favourable social status hints at the human desire for individual happiness, an inclination which Aristotle appropriately labels this inclination as "self-love". Variations of self-love – desires to appear prosperous, enjoy a delicious treat, partake in a pleasant ambience – are often the fundamental reasons why people set foot in coffee shops like Starbucks. When a person has beneficial self-love, what they aspire for is noble, and as such its actualization leads to the improvement of the common good. In contrast, the masses generally desire what is to their own advantage in the form of "honours and bodily pleasures", exemplifying a destructive kind of self-love that has the potential to harm their community (Ameriks and Clarke [2000], 175). Importantly, concentrating on self-gratification easily deflects a person's attention away from the lives of others, weakening an outlook essential for the existence of civic friendship (Leontsini [2013], 32). Ray Oldenburg identifies heavy commercialization within a gathering place as "the enemy of an informal public life" for this very reason, writing that "advertising, in its ideology and effects…breeds alienation. It convinces people that the good life can be individually purchased" (11). In other words, marketing can propagate an ego-centric worldview that harmfully channels citizens' inclinations of self-love, predisposing them to neglect their need to contribute to a healthier community.

In light of this, it is concerning that any visit to Starbucks entails an encounter with holistic pleasures tailored to incite detrimental self-love. Consider the process of placing an order, for instance. Marketing expert Stanley C. Plog explains: "since each cup of coffee is brewed separately, and patrons make their own choices of combinations of flavours and enhancements, [the atmosphere] conveys a message of personality and individuality to each customer" (286). Another defining element of the "Starbucks experience" is the personalised interaction with the barista; Starbucks seeks to secure the affections of its customers by focusing employee training on how to make buyers feel like "special guests" (Schultz and Gordon [2012], 12; Plog [2005], 286). Moreover, buying a highly-priced coffee is "a way of giving yourself a gift…an indulgence" (Dickinson [2002], 20). Given the focus

of individuality within a Starbucks, does it follow that its potential for facilitating neighbourly social connection is weakened? Wurgaft argues this point, as he lamented upon learning that a Starbucks was about to open in his community: "I worry that my peers, many of them headed for solid middle-class citizenship, are losing their sense of connection to one another." He added that a Starbucks would continue to undermine this connection by encouraging "rootless affluence…the presence of financially empowered people with no sense of belonging. Such people can never be more than witnesses to community life" (72). While individual pleasure is integral to the Starbucks experience, socialization with strangers is an accidental component of any Starbucks visit, and this imbalance encourages customers to settle for a deprived communal life.

Yet how can this loss of civic interactions within a space be visibly measured? Historically, the nature of conversation in a third place has been a barometer of its quality (Oldenburg [1989], 27). For example, longstanding coffeehouse traditions include "conversation, debate…and oppositional politics" (Simon [2009], 243). Coffee shops in England during the early modern era are particularly famous for hosting discourse among members of different socioeconomic classes, conversations that fuelled major social and political change (189). As referenced earlier, the Greek agora during the time of Aristotle provided a forum for a full range of perspectives on Athenian life and politics (Mitchell [1995], 88). In contrast, Starbucks is very cautious about the social controversies openly acknowledged within its environment. This was evidenced by an incident at a company store close to Baylor University, Texas, where cups featuring a quote by gay artist Armistead Maupin were removed after a faculty member complained. Simon notes that free speech can be limited in Starbucks; even the discourse that the company is willing to host is tailored to serving its commercial interests (Simon [2009], 257; Snyder [2006], 70). Ironically, by attempting to suppress discord, Starbucks is actually limiting the extent of the civic concord generated by the interactions between citizens within its spaces.

More controversial conversation topics aside, casual discourse between members of the same community who do not know each other is rare in a Starbucks. While the experience of coffeehouse conversation is commonly highlighted in Starbucks marketing, Starbucks advertisements rarely invite customers to socialize in its environment. While the company claims to generate coffeehouse conversation by distributing materials to spark discussion, the ineffectiveness of their efforts betrays their motivation of generating profit. The most prominent example of this is the *Joe* magazine, which heavily featured advertisements about coffee and is now discontinued (Gaudio [2003], 675; Simon [2009], 252). People do not generally converse with others they have never met in a Starbucks; Simon states: "at Starbucks not only do you not have to talk, you don't talk; you keep your head down" (251). Since conversation is fundamental to the development of any type of friendship, the environment at Starbucks is clearly not very effective when it comes to facilitating civic relationships.

Where, indeed, are the civic friendships at Starbucks? The answer is that they are overwhelmingly found in the advertising. Schultz's promise to provide a "third place" is, in fact, misleading. To be sure, among the company's vast number of stores, some may partially actualize its marketed promises of communal connection. However, this achievement would result from a shop's management team having a community-oriented outlook, rather than from Starbucks' vision as a company. While Schultz has created a location that allows people to gather, the experience of social engagement within this space is permeated with appeals to elevated socioeconomic status and individual satisfaction. And what might customers in a "postmodern consumer culture" desire more than the aspect of belonging to the "nostalgic view of community" marketed by Starbucks (Thomp-

son and Arsel [2004], 640)? Simon aptly summarizes: "What Starbucks is selling is belonging, something people want in their lives and don't always have" (Simon [2011], 145). The success of Starbucks lies in its creation of an illusion of connection between its consumers, ironically undermining their ability to participate in real forms of civic belonging.

In summary, Starbucks spaces succeed in creating communities centered on the pursuit of consumerism rather than the enjoyment of civic friendship. Interactions that embody civic friendship do not draw attention to socioeconomic difference. Neither do they elevate individual pleasure at the expense of genuine relationship. The spaces created by Starbucks, however, negate these fundamental aspects of civic belonging: they both depend on and glorify the appearance of elitism; they pander to their customers as consumers rather than people; and they seek to facilitate conversations that align with their marketing strategy rather than healthy democratic discourse. When scrutinized, therefore, Starbucks stores fall short of their proclaimed role as third spaces, reflecting the broader social decline of informal gathering places.

While this essay has dealt with Starbucks stores specifically, an interesting topic for future inquiry is the counterculture catalysed by Starbucks' success, leading to the proliferation of numerous independently-owned coffee shops across North America. These enterprises do surprisingly well in competition with Starbucks. In the absence of an advertising strategy that prioritizes commercial interests, it is possible that many of them are environments more conducive to the formation of civic friendships than Starbucks, although this is not a guarantee (American [2008]; Fellner [2008], 129). Ironically, opposition to Starbucks might have indirectly provoked greater degrees of civic friendship in certain cases. Further investigation into these pockets of community could yield beneficial results; perhaps these coffee shops promise the havens of healthy democracy that Starbucks has failed to be. As Aristotle reminds us, locating third places in our midst is imperative, since the extent of friendship between citizens is "the extent of their community" and "the extent of their justice" (154).

Author Biography

Anna Buhrmann graduated in the spring of 2021 from the Arts & Science program at McMaster University. The potential for social policy to foster human belonging and well-being intrigues her. So do Ancient Greek philosophers and community coffee shops, inspiring her to write a paper for her first-year philosophy class that combined these three interests. She is grateful to the coffee shops where she drafted her inquiry and to JIRR for the opportunity to share the result.

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Distinguishing Between Suicidality and Mental Illness

Elle Klassen

IN modern Western society, suicide is considered a derivative of mental illness. Though suicide has occurred throughout human history, its widespread attribution to mental illness has developed only in the last 200 years due to the medicalization of deviance (Conrad and Schneider [1980]). Most current research on suicidality is produced by the medical and legal sectors and focuses on methods of prevention, assuming the irrationality of suicidal ideation. Current sociological inquiries tend to neglect meaningful contextual analysis and frame suicidality as an individual mental problem which must be addressed through prevention methods targeting high-risk individuals (Wray et al. [2011]). The dominance of cultural values that promote medical understandings of previously non-medical phenomena has led academics and the general population to accept mental illness as the cause of suicide without completing sufficient critical analysis (Pridmore [2011]). The connection between suicidality and mental illness makes sense from a broad perspective and applies to many cases but does not address several key issues that arise upon contextual exploration of the topic. This paper observes the complexities of mental illness and suicidality through contemporary and historical standpoints to determine the degree to which they are connected. It finds that the widespread understanding in modern Western society that suicidality is inherent and automatic evidence of mental illness is misled due to its basis in oversimplified conceptions of mental illness and suicidality. Specifically, it demonstrates that suicidality is caused by a diverse variety of factors and can occur in the absence of mental illness.

The perspective that suicidality is inherently derived from mental illness implies that the presence of mental illness can be objectively determined. Although the clinical identification of individual mental illnesses can be supported by evidence, the broader concept of "mental illness" is a subjective descriptor which cannot be defined by any one characteristic. Rather, mental illness is a hypothetical construct which describes a diverse range of deviant psychological modes or characteristics (Morey [1991]). In contrast to many other medical conditions, the category of "mental illness" has no essential distinguishing characteristic and thus cannot be explicitly defined (Zechmeister [2018]). Suicidality is not inherently evidential of mental illness because the hypothetical construct of mental illness is not itself a disease with which suicidality can be comorbid.

That said, it is generally understood that "mental illness" refers to maladaptive mental patterns which significantly disrupt one's ability to function physically, emotionally, or both. Those who are mentally ill struggle with "normal" life processes that are considered manageable to the mentally healthy person (Sanati [2009]). Psychiatrist Paul McHugh divides the diverse manifestations of mental illness into four categories. Most of these categories describe the exacerbation of a mental pattern that is considered normal when exhibited to a lesser extent or in abnormal or distressing life conditions (McNally [2012]). The categories detail abnormal responses to general life, in which a person fails to respond in a healthy way to regular lived experiences. Determining whether a person is mentally ill is difficult because their mental state must be weighed against their experiences to determine whether it is a "normal" reaction to their

situation. If this weighing is not performed, and a person's mental state is judged outside of the context of their situation, the concept of mental illness ceases to have meaning. Thus, mental health and mental illness must be distinguished through contextualized judgments of abnormality.

Suicidality indicates an unwillingness to continue living for any number of reasons. If the reason is that one cannot function in regular life conditions without struggling psychologically, mental illness is present. However, if one has simply endured or is enduring something that is widely considered unbearable even for a mentally healthy person, then their suicidality is not pathological, and they may be considered mentally healthy (Dorff [1998]). The element that ultimately distinguishes between these concepts is normality. Importantly, what constitutes "normal" behaviour is a significant point of contention in psychology and can be determined only theoretically in a process of social consensus. What is considered normal and abnormal varies immensely throughout history and across cultures, and thus, no action or state can be objectively said to stem from mental illness or health (Leenaars [2002]). Thus, an understanding of suicidality among modern conceptions of mental health and illness must be constructed from a place of strong intercultural and historical awareness. This must be done with the understanding that mental health and illness are fluid, and suicidality has the potential to be seen as frequently, but never certainly, abnormal.

The idea that suicidality is irrevocably linked to mental illness rests on the assumption that, morally, death should always be avoided (Ashraf [2007]). This perspective is informed by a wealth of cultural and historical discourse surrounding the value and meaning of life. Critical consideration of this basic life and death paradigm is necessary to understand the various perspectives on suicidality. Although Western society conceptualizes suicidality in terms of methods of prevention and the experience of the individual, many current and past cultures focus on its moral repugnancy instead of examining its practical effects (Sanati [2009]). Today's discourse fits well with the modern movement for mental health but lacks the critical lens of past eras and other cultures.

Although there have been diverse perceptions of suicide throughout history, one common thread is the idea that it is a boldly intentional act. Until suicidality was introduced into the medical sphere in the 1800s, society held various perspectives on its morality but generally agreed that responsibility for the act rested on the individual, whose mental stability was not in question (Marsh [2013]). Suicide was widely labeled a criminal act since the time of Ancient Greece when philosophers argued that taking one's life was a conscious choice that disrespected state resources and had negative social effects (Ashraf [2007]). The decriminalization of suicide in Western society removed the historically accepted agency of those who experience suicidality and positioned them as powerless victims of an irrational outcome of mental illness. Regardless of whether suicide is framed as a criminal act or a victimizing experience, it is and has been considered unnatural and abominable in Western society (Ashraf [2007]). Since suicidal persons are not presently criminalized, they must be victimized, regardless of context, to substantiate the Western cognitive bias that suicide is wrong. To escape this limiting bias and examine the connection between suicidality and mental illness more critically, one must explore the perspectives of non-Western knowledge systems.

In various non-Western historical and contemporary cultures, suicide is seen, in certain circumstances, as a rational and even morally upright act. Suicidality can be considered, outside of the limiting criminal/victim framework used in the Western world, as an experience more strongly rooted in the social and environmental context than in one's individual immorality or pathology. For example, during most of Japan's history, suicide has been seen

as a justifiable escape from the pressures of living (Leenaars [2002]). Mainstream Japanese society saw suicide as a pitiable but sensible way to escape economic stress, political disgrace, or other troubling life situations as recently as the twentieth century. It was even considered honourable to the point of necessity in certain contexts, such as when it was used a method to escape military capture, or as an apology made by school principals under whose watch large numbers of students had been harmed (Hayakawa [1957]). Thus, suicidality was seen as a tool used to react to life situations and experiences, and not as a measure of morality or mental stability.

There are several other examples of suicide being understood outside of the context of mental illness. The Chinese traditions of Confucianism and Taoism value human life as the highest gift, and as such, "[see] no right to suicide" (Hayakawa [1957]). Similarly, the Christian religion often poses suicide as taking away the God-given gift of life, sinful because it removes God's power over life and death. Some spiritual traditions of the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island posit suicide as the abhorrent result of a person being out of balance and not appreciating nature's gift of life. However, unlike the Chinese and Christian traditions, the Indigenous traditions in question have historically held certain exceptions to the spiritual aversion to suicide. For example, they have historically considered it acceptable for a warrior to give their life in battle to win, or for elders to walk out into snowstorms to preserve food for younger generations when it was scarce (Leenaars [2002]). In India, suicide has been widely condemned, being permitted only when a person has sinned beyond redemption (Hayakawa [1957]). Thus, even in cultures which have a general moral, social, legal, or spiritual opposition to suicide, it is often the case that some suicides are permitted. Historically, cultures and societies have not opposed suicide absolutely. Most importantly, they have not evaluated those experiencing suicidality based on mental abnormality or instability, but rather on their morality or immorality as autonomous people.

Today, Western culture surrounding life, death, and suicide is shifting. While suicidality is still overwhelmingly linked to mental illness in Western ideologies, new ideas regarding human normality and autonomy are surfacing. A notable instance of this is the current discourse around euthanasia (Dorff [1998]). Western society's increasing acceptance of euthanasia indicates that at least some proportion of the suicidal population is seen as mentally stable, because amidst the current wave of mental health action, society strives to prevent dangerous acts of mental instability.

There are also other cases in which suicidality is arguably not the result of psychological abnormality, but rather a normal response to unbearable life conditions. In direct contrast to the idea that suicide is abnormal, one contemporary line of thought argues that opting to stay alive while suffering agonizing or hopeless conditions or circumstances can be considered abnormal (Dorff [1998]). For example, a prisoner undergoing continuous torture with no hope of ever escaping may be considered rational in their suicidality because they are clearly assessing their living conditions and believe death to be more bearable. Similarly, a person suffering mental anguish due to treatment-resistant mental illness may be rational in their suicidality (i.e., not suicidal as the result of mentally ill thought patterns) if they have conducted a similar assessment. A more controversial example is that of suicidality provoked by economic distress, in which case the person's belief in the hopelessness of their situation may be rational under the economic system within which they exist. Judgements that find this response to be abnormal must be contextualized, as the observer may not be able to understand the level of distress caused by this situation. Incidences of complete loss of family or terminal illness might also lead to suicidality in rational, "normal" people (Pridmore [2011]). Thus, observing

the context of suicidality majorly weakens the legitimacy of the overarching statement that suicidality is inevitably linked to mental illness.

The contemporary idea that suicidality is inherently tied to mental illness is based in a flawed system of medical "knowledge" that emphasizes the ostensible abnormality of suicide based on its moral wrongness (Marsh [2013]). This initial characterization conflated abnormality with immorality and led to suicidality being understood as a mental illness rather than a rational state of mind with culturally determined moral value. At the time of the initial pathologization of suicidality during the early 1800s, the institutionalization of the "mad" was emerging (Scull [1991]). The concept of "the insane"" was shifting from being understood as an obscure, scattered demographic, to being seen as a measurable, dangerous population (Scull [1991]). Institutions were built to hold the insane, but were often a guise to detain criminals, the poor, and other social outcasts (Scull [1991]). As society grew critical of this practice and more interested in the causes of insanity, the medical field intervened and created the concept which we now call "mental illness" (Marsh [2013]). The perceived moral wrongness of suicidality made it a prime candidate for medicalization, which would allow medical professionals to exercise control over the suicidal population. As Ian Marsh explains in their work on the historiography of suicide, "the arguments for... madness were somewhat sketchy... the force of such statements relied less on supporting empirical evidence, more on an emerging and productive configuration of power-knowledge," (Marsh [2013]). By positioning suicidality as an internal, individual pathology and ignoring the social context, medical professionals reframed a mindset which had historically been seen as rational in some Western histories and in other cultures.

This new knowledge system surrounding suicidality has undergone considerable change since its formation but remains largely intact today. Marsh discusses the current "regime of truth," in which the seemingly fundamental pathologization of suicide dominates modern thought surrounding suicidality, and the only substantive discussions revolve around treatment, not nature or cause (2013). Suicide is individualized and decontextualized based on the claim that denying the contribution of mental illness to suicidality is dangerous and ignorant (Marsh [2013]). This type of discourse equates the consideration of non-pathological factors with the complete rejection of the contribution of pathology, effectively blocking critical analysis of the current Western understanding of suicidality. These strategies reinforce the apparent strength of this understanding without providing actual evidence for its legitimacy.

In their work "Medicalisation of Suicide," Saxby Pridmore argues that there are major scientific flaws in conceptualizing suicidality as a medical problem (Pridmore [2011]). Pridmore finds that psychological autopsies – a main source of scientific evidence for the causal nature between mental illness and suicide – are highly subjective methods of research whose retrospective nature renders them unreliable and of questionable validity (2011). They also point to the sometimes-fallacious medicalization of distress as a factor in the problematic research; when contextually reasonable levels of distress are perceived as disordered, suicide is inevitably pathologized, because distress is almost always a precursor to suicidality (Pridmore [2011]). This process of applying medical diagnoses to "inescapable aspects of... being human" allows suicidality to be viewed as abnormal even when it is based in rational human judgement of unendurable conditions (Pridmore [2011]).

Factors other than mental illness are also prevalent in causing suicide, according to several studies performed in Asia which found social determinants to be the leading cause of suicidality (Pridmore [2011]). In modern non-Western cultures, suicide is frequently seen as the result of people observing reality rationally and making a decision (Pridmore [2011]). Soci-

ologists have argued that suicidal actions contain social meaning, and that suicidality is measurably exacerbated in those embodying certain intersectionalities (Wray et al. [2011]). Suicidality is also conceptualized as a rational individual's purposefully communicative act, which is utilized to critique society, rather than an unstable individual's desperate escape (Hayakawa [1957]). Thus, not only is the current framework of mental illness and suicidality inherently flawed, but there are also many other substantial causes of suicidality that do not call the sanity of the individual into question.

This paper has argued that the dominant contention of modern Western thought that suicidality and mental illness are inherently linked is flawed and that suicidality cannot necessarily prove the existence of something as fluid as mental illness. No human state, including suicidality, can necessarily prove the existence of something as fluid as mental illness. Cultural and historical analyses demonstrate that there are cases in which suicide is a rational act, and that the suicide-mental-illness framework is flawed. Conceptualizing suicidality only within the rigid framework of mental illness inhibits meaningful analysis of how suicidality develops and the implementation of important methods of suicide prevention. As stated by Pridmore, "the great disadvantage of all-suicide-is-caused-by-mental-disorder thinking is that important social, cultural, economic, and political factors, about which much might be done, are neglected in favour of the medical solution," (2011). Thus, suicidality is logically unable to be conceptualized as necessarily indicative of mental illness, and framing it as such poses a threat to the development of prevention and treatment. This calls for broad reassessment of social and medical understandings of suicidality and mental illness in the context of lived experiences.

Author Biography

Elle Klassen is a fourth-year Arts and Science student at McMaster University currently pursuing a double-minor in Psychology and Health, Aging, and Society. After being fascinated by the complex relationship between mental illness and suicidality for years, they wrote this paper for their Mental Health and Society course in 2019.

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Understanding Ta-Nehisi Coates' Rejection of Hope

Maanvi Dhillon

READING Ta-Nehisi Coates' book *Between the World and Me* is a jarring experience – through and through, it deviates from the common template of a memoir. Coates' storytelling conveys his familiarity with the vast and historical injustices experienced by Black Americans, both through heart-wrenching personal anecdotes and informative references, to systems and structures like the racial wealth gap and American mass incarceration. Though the book was published in 2015, it remains a deeply relevant and timely contribution; many Americans continue to be ignorant of the scope and depth of racial inequality in their country. This ignorance was brought to focus during the summer of 2020, when multiple murders of Black Americans by police officers gained international attention, including the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis (Bennett et al. [2020]). While the Black Lives Matter movement and prison abolitionists have pointed to the American police's racism and violence for years, these cases seemed to finally penetrate the broader consciousness of non-Black Americans, and they participated in protests of an unprecedented scale across the country (Buchanan et al. [2020]). The momentum appeared to spread far, as anti-Black racism was confronted in a myriad of places from professional sports to universities to celebrity social media feeds. Some observed how responses to the protests included superficial, symbolic gestures like corporate statements of solidarity and the removal of statues depicting racist figures, without accompanying substantive change (Brown [2021], Taylor [2021], Moore [2020]). However, much of the surrounding rhetoric characterized the summer as a tipping point, a reckoning, and a dramatic pivot in the public's support of movements for racial justice. This tendency of American popular discourse to extract a narrative of hope and progress from the summer's protests happens to provide a fascinating illustration of the themes and messages in Coates' memoir. What is most striking about his work, and what has fuelled critique from some readers, is his explicit rejection of hope. Coates' decision not to cater to the American audience's craving for optimistic stories has been judged for dampening the motivation people need to fight for racial equality.

Coates' decision to reject hope should be evaluated with a more strategic lens, keeping in mind the nuanced intentions of a writer with such a powerful voice. A crucial aspect of this text is the various audiences that it speaks to: though he formatted the text as a message for his son, Coates would have expected the work to generally reach both Black Americans and white Americans. In this essay, I will use literary analysis to argue that Coates' renouncement of hope is two-pronged, and that his book contains different messages for his various audiences. I will argue that when Coates denounces the hope associated with the American dream, he is addressing his general audience – most specifically, those who have benefitted from or were bought into the American dream ("Dreamers") – which are white and privileged Americans. However, Coates addresses Black Americans and prioritizes their well-being and survival when he suggests not to have a hope that is conditional on ending racism in America, which I will explain using the literary and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's contributions to affect theory from their book *Cruel Op-*

timism. Overall, Coates makes the important point that the fight for equality is a painful one, and that Black people risk their health, safety, and happiness for an impossible cause if they alone carry the burden of liberating themselves against structures of entrenched racial power and privilege in the US.

To begin, Coates' text contains a searing indictment of the national narrative of hope in the United States known as the American dream, the suggestion that the fairness and vast opportunity available in American society allow any hard worker to succeed and climb to a position of financial security. Coates labels the idyllic outcome of this narrative as the "the Dream", which he describes as "perfect houses with nice lawns…Memorial Day cookouts, block associations, and driveways…treehouses and the Cub Scouts" (11). An important criticism Coates levels towards the Dream regards its implication that wealthy and privileged Americans have earned their progress through their own hard work, when much of the success of white Americans can be traced to the exploitation and oppression of Black Americans. Coates uses several examples to show the consistency of this trend, with the most prominent being slavery. While the American dream is meant to channel America's spirit as a young, scrappy colony that built its way to the top of the global economy with hard work, Coates debunks this myth by reminding readers that America's economy began with the stolen labour of Black people:

> At the onset of the Civil War, our stolen bodies were worth four billion dollars, more than all of American industry, all of American railroads, workshops, and factories combined, and the prime product rendered by our stolen bodies - cotton - was America's primary export. The richest men in America…made their riches off our stolen bodies…The soul was the body that fed the tobacco, and the spirit was the blood that watered the cotton, and these created the first fruits of the American garden (101, 104).

Coates goes on to prove the "tradition" of Americans exploiting Black people for their own profit by citing examples such as the modern private prison system, where prison operators earn profit from incarcerating a disproportionately large number of Black Americans, thus turning "the warehousing of Black bodies into a jobs program…and lucrative investment for Dreamers" (132). These examples contradict the hope weaved into the American dream by exposing the fact that exploitation is inextricable from evidentiary cases of American industry growth and economic mobility. Coates persuasively refutes the idea that white American success is pure and uncontaminated by the country's historical and ongoing oppression of Black Americans. By repeatedly exposing examples of profit produced by the unjust mistreatment of Black Americans, Coates challenges the classic association between hard work and good character that helps to sustain the American Dream. Coates uproots the core of the American dream myth, which should compel successful and privileged Dreamers to rethink the apparent truthfulness and justice of the hope narrative they have subscribed to.

Furthermore, the flip side of the personal responsibility implied by the American dream is that like success, failure is earned, and people living in poor conditions have only themselves to blame. Coates rejects this implication by connecting the struggles of Black life in America to the actions of white Americans. For example, the mass American public has paid much attention to the murders of innocent Black men by American police officers; these are always blamed on errors of the victims, like "Eric Garner's anger" or "Trayvon Martin's mythical words", but the frequency of these incidents and their unprovoked nature suggests that the murders are the product of widespread racist attitudes and reflect the fear that

many Americans harbour toward Black men (Ta-Nehisi [2015] 78, 96). Coates also references how ghettos like those in north Chicago, which are often Black-dominated areas, were not created naturally but instead "engineered by government policy" (131). For instance, redlining was a government practice that classified the risk of providing credit to people based on geographic location and, due to racist attitudes, resulted in neighbourhoods with mostly Black people being denied home loans and avoided by investors (Jan [2018]). Even though Dreamers created ghettos, Black people suffered, and continue to suffer, the consequences of cyclic poverty and high crime in such areas. Thus, to blame them for "Black-on-Black" crime in these communities is to ignore the orchestration of ghettos by white Americans and "[vanish] the men who engineered the covenants, who fixed the loans, who planned the projects, who built the streets and sold red ink by the barrel" (Ta-Nehisi [2015]; 110, 111). One of Coates' most profound observations is that growing up in such neighbourhoods impedes Black people in a less obvious way by forcing them to spend so much time and mental energy on the task of simply ensuring their own safety (24). All of these impediments contribute to a cycle that makes it incredibly difficult for young Black people to escape the conditions they were born into; as Coates writes, "We could not get out. The ground we walked was trip-wired. The air we breathed was toxic. The water stunted our growth. We could not get out" (27, 28). In sum, Coates disputes the notion that Black people are responsible for problems plaguing their communities, and in doing so he provides more reasons to reject the American dream and its brand of hope.

Overall, by refuting the notion that American success is justly earned through innocent hard work, and instead connecting their economic success to racial inequality and the oppression of Black people, Ta-Nehisi Coates makes a strong case against the hope of the American dream. While this message might be directed at all readers, Coates' writing seems to suggest something more strategic. For example, when discussing the inherent connection between the struggles of Black communities and the success of white communities, Coates mentions that "[he] knew, as all Black people do, that this fear was connected to the Dream out there" (29). He also explains how he once "wanted to escape into the Dream, to fold [his] country over [his] head like a blanket" but being ignorant was never possible because "the Dream rests on our backs, the bedding made from our bodies" (11). In these statements, Coates appears to acknowledge that most Black Americans are aware of the Dream's falsity because, like Coates, they witness the constant contradictions between the Dream's suggestions and their lived realities. They learn over the course of their lives that despite the Dream's claim of equality, they have to work twice as hard as their white peers, and despite the Dream's claim of reciprocity, their success is always bound by some limit (Ta-Nehisi [2015], 90). So, the task of learning to relinquish the Dream is not as urgent for Black Americans as it is for white Americans, who manage to go their whole lives with their heads under the blanket of the American dream and completely buy into its premises. In other words, Coates' message is for the Dreamers who allowed Flint's water crisis, who call the police on Black people doing ordinary things, and who believe they have earned their wealthy, comfortable, safe, and white lives in a vacuum and consequently have no moral obligation to care about the problems of Black Americans. Coates' arguments demonstrate that a crucial condition for the liberation of Black Americans is for white Americans to acknowledge the injustice tainting the American dream hope narrative and work to change the structures and power imbalances that perpetuate these conditions.

This leaves an important question to address: what is Coates' message for Black Americans? *Between the World and Me* has an explicitly named audience – Coates' son Samori – and the language often

positions Coates in unity with the reader, using words like "our" and "we". While the text may be framed as being specifically for his son, the audience Coates addresses so intimately can also be interpreted as all Black Americans. Writing as a father, Coates' priority is the safety and wellbeing of his child, which are constantly threatened by the effects of racism. Even though the novel contains lessons ranging from American history to Black activism, the overall tone seems to be advisory rather than merely informative; he is advising his son on how to survive, and flourish, given the nature and realities of his country. Coates' paternal tone makes his lack of optimism about America's ability to achieve racial equality deeply telling and meaningful. While we might want to believe that hope for racial equality would be the best attitude for anybody, Coates argues that having hope would be detrimental to his son, and by extension, to other Black Americans.

To understand why Coates rejects this kind of hope, we must first consider the facts he establishes about the possibility of liberating Black Americans. This includes a hard truth about the fight for racial equality: that Black Americans cannot make it happen by themselves. Coates is firm in his belief that liberating themselves, entirely on the basis of their own efforts, is not a viable option for Black people or oppressed peoples in general and provides no historical evidence as a strategy (Ta-Nehisi [2015], 96). The point is especially salient when Coates recalls the story of a peer at Howard University named Prince Jones who was killed by a police officer. Coates met with Prince's mother and learned about how she sent him to private school, bought him a car, took him travelling, and raised him to be an intelligent, well-liked boy, and yet even such privilege and careful nurturing could not protect him from the racist act that ended his life (Ta-Nehisi [2015]; 64, 81). While reflecting on the tragedy, Coates affirms his stance on Black Americans' limited abilities to save each other and themselves from the unrelenting and pervasive forces of racism; he writes, "We are captured brother, surrounded by the majoritarian bandits of America…and the terrible truth is that we cannot will ourselves to an escape on our own" (146). He notes that Black activists and movements have accepted this truth, and their goal appears to be "to awaken the Dreamers, to rouse them to the facts of what their need…to think that they are white…has done to the world" (146). However, Coates believes that external efforts to wake up the Dreamers are futile and given their large numbers, power, wealth and everything else that privileges them over Black people only the Dreamers themselves can put a halt to the injustice and oppression that is fed by their lifestyles (Ta-Nehisi [2015], 151).

Coates goes on to acknowledge the bleak chances of white Americans voluntarily departing with the superiority that racist structures and systems provide them. He recognizes that many Dreamers would never explicitly state their comfort with the suffering of Black people, but that they are vehemently attached to the privilege this suffering affords them: "very few Americans will directly proclaim that they are in favour of Black people being left to the streets. But a very large number of Americans will do all they can to preserve the Dream" (33). Since they are uncomfortable with this suffering, but refuse to give up their Dream, they resort to willfully forgetting the inherent connection between these realities: "The forgetting is…another necessary component of the Dream. They have forgotten the scale of theft that enriched them in slavery; the terror that allowed them, for a century, to pilfer the vote; the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs…because to remember would tumble them out of the beautiful Dream" (143). Coates also believes that the process of gaining from Black suffering has become habit for Dreamers, and so even if they were to recognize the injustice caused by their success, they might prefer the status quo because they are addicted to the formula of easy and cheap gains, which he likens to

the "seductiveness of cheap gasoline" (150). Overall, Coates' arguments make it difficult to have faith in the possibility that white Americans will develop the strength and selflessness needed to give up the Dream and its associated racism.

A question underlies Coates' discouraging arguments: in these conditions of systematic inequality and oppression, what happens when Black people continue to invest themselves and their energy into a hope that the Dreamers will wake up and they will eventually be liberated? Coates' answer to this question is that Black people are harmed in this scenario, and maintaining hope is no neutral or easy act, but can be exhausting, disappointing, and dangerous. He explains how resisting the Dream is burdensome for Black people because it leads to "[their] country telling [them] the Dream is just, noble, and real, and [they] are crazy for seeing the corruption and smelling the sulphur" (106). Constantly having their fear and anger brushed off can cause them to lose confidence in their critique, and Coates suggests this can drive Black people to ironically undo their own realization of the lies of the American dream, and instead buy into the idea that they are responsible for their communities' issues (106). Additionally, Coates tells the story of a young Black boy who was shot by a white man after defending himself and refusing to turn down his music – when reflecting on the story, the boy's mother, who taught her son to stand up for himself, wonders "Had he not spoke back, spoke up, would he still be here?" (114). The boy had the right to stand up for himself, and his refusal to submit could have led that white man to realize that they were on equal footing and that this young Black man had no obligation to obey him, but the tragic result of his murder calls the ultimate worth of this stand into question. The fact that the man was not charged for the murder speaks volumes – Black people's protests cannot compete with the authoritative voice of a justice system that permits the murder of Black Americans (Ta-Nehisi [2015], 112). This is why Coates feels ashamed rather than proud of a story in which he stood up to a white woman who pushed his son, as he knows his anger could have jeopardized the lives of him and his family if the police were called (95). Furthermore, many parts of the book detail how emotionally draining it can feel to constantly experience the disappointment of dashed hopes, from Coates' sadness after he fails to teach a reporter about the severity of racial injustice in America, to his son's sadness when Michael Brown's killer was not indicted (11, 12). These cases exemplify how much the labour of hope takes from Black Americans, from their confidence in their beliefs, to their lives, to their happiness. The logic of rejecting hope is to assert that Black people are not obligated to make these sacrifices.

To better understand Coates' rejection of hope, we can think about hope for racial equality as an instance of Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism. Berlant's work is a famous contribution to affect theory, which are theories considering effects experienced by humans that cannot be captured in typical modes of representation and signification (Grossberg [2010], 318). Lisa Blackman expands on this element of affect in her description: "Affect refers to those registers of experience which cannot be easily seen, and which might variously be described as non-cognitive, trans-subjective, non-conscious, non-representational, incorporeal and immaterial" (4). Due to its incompatibility with typical methodologies for interpreting meaning like language and sight (Blackman and Venn [2010], 9), affect is often characterized as escaping or existing in excess of traditional representational thinking; Lawrence Grossberg provides the description of "a gap between what can be rendered meaningful or knowable and what is nevertheless livable" (318), and Kathleen Stewart refers to "a gathering place of accumulative dispositions…not meaning gathered into codes but the gathering of experience beyond subjectivity, a transduction of forces, a social aesthetics attuned to the way a

tendency takes on consistency, or a new regime of sensation becomes a threshold to the real" (340). Citations of and contributions to affect studies are found in fields ranging from philosophy to psychoanalysis to cultural studies (Arthur [2020]), though they generally consider similar questions about embodied experiences and the forces beyond conscious knowing that move people (Schaefer [2019]; Seigworth and Gregg [2010]). These forces of affect have also been described as "intensities" by the prominent theorist Brian Massumi, which helps us to imagine affect as a process or motion, something that is felt but cannot be directed or structured (86). Massumi articulates how the effect and resonance of intensity may not be logically connected to some content or representation, as meaning and affect operate on different levels (Massumi [1995], 84-85; Blackman and Venn [2010], 17). The impacts of affects are innumerable, as they may be forces that "serve to drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension, that can likewise suspend us (as if in neutral) across a barely registering accretion of force-relations, or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world's apparent intractability" (Seigworth and Gregg [2010]). Affect is crucially considered an "analytic of power" (Arthur [2020]), as it attends to the "capacities to affect and to be affected" (Stewart [2010], 339; Evans [2017]). The concept of affect seems similar to emotion, but actually varies from emotion's subjective and internal, personal form (Massumi [1995], 88). Affect is often described as extending outside the bounding of a single body and being necessarily relational – passing between bodies and each other or the world (Blackman and Venn [2010], 21; Blackman and Venn [2010], 1-2).

Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism considers how affect can function to keep us in relationships and positions that detract from our wellbeing. As Berlant describes, "a relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). Any attachment to something desired is optimistic – whether it be food, a lover, sex, patriotism – and we often form these attachments in pursuit of a vision of "the good life" (Berlant [2011]; 2, 25). Berlant explains that affect is the force that draws us back to the object of attachment; though it may be experienced as any feeling, ranging from anxiety to happiness, "the *affective structure* of an optimistic attachment involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way" (2). However, the relation becomes cruel when the object we depend on blocks the very thriving that we sought and that brought us to it in the first place (Berlant [2011], 25). For example, Berlant frames the fantasy of upward mobility in America as a cruel optimism. They note that because of economic trends driven by post Second World War neoliberal policies, like deepening inequality, people have grown to adjust to a state of collective and ongoing crisis, or "crisis ordinariness" (10), and Berlant tracks affective responses to the conditions of this age (15-16) and its atmospheres of "anxiety, contingency, and precarity" (19). The continued pursuit of good life fantasies that are no longer possible to attain leads people to enter a self-destructive relationship: they work so much that they do not have time for intimate relationships, they exhaust their bodies, and they become reliant on unhealthy habits to cope with their stressful lives (Berlant [2011]; 28, 96-119, 192-222). Berlant argues that when we invest our endurance and our willingness to go on in these varying forms of good life fantasies and their beautiful promises, we "enable a concept of the *later* to suspend questions about the cruelty of the *now*" (28). Turning back to Coates' memoir, it appears that the cruel optimism relation is precisely what Coates seeks to avoid by advising his son, and other Black people, against hope about improving racial equality in the US: he does not want them to recklessly or frequently subject themselves to the cruelty of the now for the sake of

a just future that hinges on white people waking up from their Dream. If Black people turn the fantasy of racial equality into "an anchor for [their] optimism about life", they might be devastated when it is not realized, because when "a relation in which you've invested fantasies of your own coherence and potential breaks down, the world itself feels endangered" (Berlant [2012]).

With this perspective in mind, Coates' intentions gain a sharp new clarity in passages like the following: "you cannot arrange your life around…the small chance of the Dreamers coming into consciousness. Our moment is too brief. Our bodies are too precious" (146). Or, "…do not struggle for the Dreamers. Hope for them…But do not pin your struggle on their conversion" (Ta-Nehisi [2015], 151). Coates gives his audience permission to resist the affective pull of the fantasy of hope. He urges them to prioritize their safety, health, wellbeing, love, and time over their labour to convert the Dreamers, and while he is not barring them from doing that work, he releases them of the burden to sacrifice so much for the sake of correcting another group's unjust behaviour. This supports a generalizable point about progress for marginalized communities: sometimes, the responsibility to bring about equality is borne solely by oppressed groups in a world where they lack the power to make required societal changes. The work of maintaining hope is taxing and risky in such conditions. Members of an oppressed community must anticipate the possibility that they may be so worn and emptied out from their fight for justice that they cannot enjoy the flourishing and happy lives that a future, tentative, and hard-fought equality would make possible for them. Coates asks a brave and critical question to Black Americans: is hope worth its cruel cost?

In conclusion, Ta-Nehisi Coates makes cases for hope that vary between the parts of his audience: while he provides evidence that urges white Americans to wake up from the hope of the American dream, he also instructs his son, and I argue, his entire Black audience, not to sacrifice themselves for the sake of hoping for racial equality in America. While his message may seem unhelpful or negative, Lauren Berlant's theory of cruel optimism reveals why we can view hope with skepticism and recognize its harmful potential when it subjects us to destructive processes and when the impossible or unlikely fantasy attached to our hope lies too close to our hearts. Evidenced by this book and his continued presence in conversations about race in America, Coates has not given up on making activist contributions and fighting for the liberation of Black Americans. However, he does so with pragmatism instead of hope because the cause of converting white people to new attitudes is not more important than protecting himself and his family, and because having hope and living as though the Dreamers will wake up has proven to be too costly for Black people.

Interestingly, the rare notes of optimism in Coates' and Berlant's writing intersect, as both suggest solidarity as an alternative to hope and as a source of realness in contrast to hope's artificiality (Berlant [2011], 266; Ta-Nehisi [2015], 69). While neither writer dwells on the point, perhaps this supplies the "missing incentive" in their pessimistic works: that instead of constantly looking to the future, we should relish and endure life in the present, together. Paying attention to the people around us might be a promising way to step out of the unjust and deceiving fantasies that have so much power in governing our lives.

Author Biography

Maanvi Dhillon recently graduated from McMaster University's Arts & Science program. She is interested in political theory, literature, and all the spaces between the two, which is why she was thrilled to examine

Ta-Nahisi Coates' work in this essay. While seeking to analyze the nuance and intention of Coates' pessimistic tone in his memoir, she found relevant insights in Lauren Berlant's affect theory. This essay brings those works together to explore the idea of hope in Coates' work. Maanvi is grateful to JIRR for the opportunity and support they have provided in sharing her work.

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Raising a Child in the Era of Smartphones: Exploring the implications of parent smartphone use for the parent-child relationship

Rhea Murti

Introduction

AS technological devices become increasingly integrated in our day-to-day lives, academic and public domains have started to examine their effects on the most impressionable members of our society – children (Radesky et al. [2016]). These discussions typically surround the child's own device use and specifically the impacts on their brain development, behaviour, and language learning. In this context, there has been an increase in the production of parenting manuals and tools to guide parents who may be worried about their child's wellbeing and keen to protect them from the dangers of developing unhealthy technology habits. Parents, however, are somewhat less inclined to question their *own* technology use. This is especially true regarding smartphone use, which is increasingly part of everyday life. Parents are often oblivious to the distraction and dependence produced by their relationship with these devices. While studying the impacts of technology use on child brain development is extremely important, it is also essential to focus on the social implications of parents' technology use; especially in terms of the parent-child relationship.

The study of parent-child relationships is rooted in attachment theory, which was formulated by British psychologist John Bowlby in 1973 and "emphasizes the importance of caring relationships for normal development of the child" (Popov and Ilesanmi [2015], 253). These caring relationships are characterised by affectionate, warm, uninterrupted and responsive parenting, in which "both parent and child find satisfaction and enjoyment" (Stafford et al. [2016], 326; Bowlby [1973], 9). Fostering a strong attachment between parent and child is especially important during the first few years of a child's life, as "relationships and patterns of interactions formed during the early stages of life serve as a prototype for many interactions later in life and might have lifelong effects" for both the parent and child (Hong and Park [2012], 450). Parents also need to be attentive to their children during this time because children do not yet have the language ability to express what they need, so they will often communicate through their behaviour (450). Unfortunately, because young children are not seeking out and actively using technological devices themselves, this age range is underrepresented in the current research on the impacts of technology.

In this paper I will address some of the gaps in mainstream discussion of technology use in parent-child relationships by focusing specifically on the ways in which a parent's attachment to their baby/young child may be impacted by their mobile device use. I will examine the question: how might the phone use habits of parents during their child's first few years of life interfere with their ability to develop a strong and healthy relationship with the child? To do so, I will consider the two main roles that smartphones are playing in parents' lives – as distractions, through a phenomenon dubbed 'tech-

noference', and as support for parenting duties of care. I will analyze how dependence on phones interferes with a parent's ability to engage with their child and attune themselves to their child's needs and emotions. I will also touch on some of the implications of this in terms of new notions of 'care' produced by common technology use. In doing so, I argue that parents are less likely to form a secure and healthy attachment relationship to their child when mobile device distraction and dependence are frequent.

Smartphone Distractions

In an article for *The Atlantic*, American specialist in early childhood education, Erika Christakis, wrote that despite the dramatic increase in the percentage of women in the workforce and the proliferation of hired help and babysitters, parents actually spend more time with their children now than in the 1960s (Christakis [2018]). However, she argues, "the engagement between parent and child is increasingly low-quality" and perhaps even "ersatz," meaning 'artificial' – which Christakis attributes to parents' continuous partial attention (Christakis [2018]). The recent infiltration of smartphones into family life has been strongly correlated with this trend. While 92% of all Americans say they own a cellphone or smartphone, mobile devices are especially common amongst parents: "households with children are more likely to own and use technology and have multiple mobile devices compared to households without children" (Kildare and Middlemiss [2017], 581). This is often due to the unique safety, entertainment, and connectivity needs that come with parenting a child – needs that childless households are unlikely to experience. While phones provide parents with many important parenting resources and support, they are also an integral part of a culture of constant connectivity that has ingrained a sense of urgency among many parents to constantly be in touch with everyone in their work and social circles. One study reports that parents described "feeling that they are expected by work and educational entities to be available always, both day and night, pulling them away from their families and children" (Johnson [2017], 1430). This expectation comes with a change of social norms that allow the invasion of portable devices into personal spaces – a change that has taken place within the lifetime of today's parents. As one parent said, "when I was growing up we didn't have cellphones and you just left a message on a machine and people got back to you when they could... now I feel like I've got to be available 24/7 and I've got to text back right away or I'm ignoring someone and being rude" (1430). This sense of urgency has reinforced a new "checking behaviour" where some parents find themselves opening their phones even when not prompted by a notification (1431). Therefore, although parents may be spending more time with their children than in the pre-smartphone era, increasing dependency on devices has produced certain habits that distract from a parent's actual engagement with the child.

Distraction amongst parents is, obviously, nothing new. Parents have always had stimuli in the world around them to distract their attention from their child. But the phenomenon is different today – it is more of a chronic distraction than an occasional inattention (Christakis [2018]). Phones provide the possibility of constant multitasking in a capitalist society where productivity and efficiency are maximized. As leading US psychologist Sherry Turkle says in her book *Alone Together*, "our networked devices encourage a new notion of time because they promise that one can layer more activities onto it. Because you can text while doing something else, texting does not seem to take time but to give you time. This is more than welcome, it is magical" (Turkle [2017], 164). Rather than being seen as capturing one's time and attention, texting is positioned as an opportunity to accomplish multiple things at once – especially when it comes to balancing work and family life. The ways

in which parents justify their phone use during family time is revealing: "They complain that their employers require them to be continually online but then admit that their devotion to their communications devices exceeds all professional expectations" (Turkle [2017], 164). The culture of smartphone use is therefore unique because of how emotionally connected parents are to the device, more so than to other types of technology of the past. Sparked by a pressure to respond to messages, and also a fear of missing out, many individuals experience anxiety over being without their phone (McDaniel [2019], 73). Therefore, although smartphones have facilitated greater connections with others, parent smartphone use may be creating a source of distraction that is disconnecting them from the people in their immediate social environment – especially from the individuals that need their attention most. As Turkle points out, "we have found ways of spending more time with friends and family in which we hardly give them any attention at all" (164). We are thus experiencing a normative shift in what it means to be present in a space with others.

'Technoference'

As a result of the pervasiveness of smartphones, interruptions in parent-child communication have increased dramatically. A new concept dubbed "technoference" has recently been introduced to represent the "everyday interruptions in interpersonal interactions or time spent together that occur due to digital and mobile technology devices" (McDaniel and Radesky [2018], 101). This theory has been commonly applied to the parent-child relationship and interruptions that occur during "face-to-face conversations, routines such as mealtimes or play, or the perception of an intrusion felt by an individual when another person interacts with digital technology during time together" (101). A 2018 study by Brandon McDaniel, a family relationship Research Scientist, and Jenny Radesky, a Developmental Behavioral Pediatrician, links problematic parental phone use to higher levels of technoference. Examples of problematic habits included the constant checking of notifications, thinking about calls/texts, and overall overuse of the phone. McDaniel and Radesky found that almost half of the parents studied had three or more instances of technoference in one day (105). Technoference is similar to what Sherry Turkle describes as people 'marking themselves as absent' by putting their phone to their ear, or more subtly glancing down at the screen during dinner (Turkle [2017], 155). In *Alone Together*, Turkle focusses on the human relationship with robots and the online networks that create the "relationships with less" that robots provide. She calls them the "unsettling isolations of the tethered self":

> "I have said that tethered to the network through our mobile devices, we approach a new state of the self, itself. For a start, it presumes certain entitlements: It can absent itself from its physical surround—including the people in it. It can experience the physical and virtual in near simultaneity." (Turkle [2017], 155).

Turkle discusses how these new norms of isolation due to digital connectivity are changing people's physical presence in public spaces. "What is a place," she asks, "if those who are physically present have their attention on the absent?" (155). As McDaniel and Radesky found, being mentally disengaged points to the potential for "relationship dysfunction" and altered interpersonal interactions in one's physical space (108). In terms of the parent-child relationship, the most immediate victim of this disengagement is the child, who experiences a diminished sense of personal importance when their parent's attention is so often captured elsewhere.

Research in this growing field of technoference is lacking and, as mentioned before, has focused

mainly on the effects on children's developmental processes. Studies on how digital distractions impact parents' own experiences with their child are much more scarce (Kushlev and Dunn [2019], 1622). The lack of relevant pre-existing research likely affects this paper's accuracy regarding parent experiences with technoference. However, a few recent qualitative studies have revealed how parents' ubiquitous engagement with the digital world through their smartphones is affecting the benefits they reap from concurrent nondigital activities with their children (1620). In 2018, Canadian psychologists Kostadin Kushlev and Elizabeth Dunn conducted a field experiment in a science museum and a weeklong diary study of parents' daily lives. In the science museum study, parents were assigned to either maximize or minimize their phone use during the visit, and in the diary study, 300 parents' regular phone use at home was tracked over the course of a week (1623, 1630). In both cases, higher levels of smartphone use were associated with greater feelings of distraction among parents, which was in turn linked to lower feelings of social connection to the child (1635). Other studies – done in restaurants, playgrounds, doctor offices, and more – have suggested very similar conclusions: "parent phone use is associated with less verbal interaction, lower parental responsiveness, and at times harsher parental responses" (McDaniel [2019], 74). By hindering social connection, technoference is taking away from the parent's ability to meaningfully bond with their child or make the most of time spent with them. In the context of Bowlby's attachment theory, mobile technology interferes with the much needed 'uninterrupted and responsive parenting', therefore detracting from the satisfaction and enjoyment that parents can derive from interactions with their child. These relationship issues become more evident when focusing on the impacts of technoference on child behaviour.

In their study on technoference, McDaniel and Radesky found that "even low and seemingly normative amounts of technoference were associated with greater child behavior problems" – both internalizing behaviours (whining, sulking, hurt feelings) and externalizing behaviours (restlessness, hyperactivity, being quick to frustration, temper tantrums) (McDaniel and Radesky [2018], 109). These child behaviour patterns, as a study by Radesky et al. observed, influence how parents themselves perceive their child and their relationship with the child. The authors of this report specifically examined maternal mental representations of the child in relation to phone use during parent-child eating encounters, both in the home and in the laboratory. Maternal mental representations are important because a parent's – in this case, a mother's – opinions regarding "the child's thoughts, motivations, and causes for their behavior are important predictors of how the parent responds to the child" (Radesky et al. [2018], 311). As supported by Bowlby's theorizing as well, these mental representations include the parent's cognitive and affective (or, mental and emotional) perspectives regarding their relationship with the child and the child's personality (311). The research team measured these mental representations via an interview method known as Working Model of the Child Interview (WMCI), and rated the representations along multiple dimensions such as Richness of Perception (how they efficiently and effectively convey "who" their child is) and Caregiving Sensitivity (how they describe recognizing and responding to the child's needs) (312). They found that a mother's active phone use during both family meals and laboratory-based eating tasks was positively correlated with perception of the child as difficult, and "negatively associated with the mother's richness of perceptions of the child and caregiving sensitivity" (316). "Taken together," the authors concluded, "these findings suggest that parent mobile device use during daily routines with children may be a reflection of underlying relationship difficulties" (316). As attachment theory suggests, these patterns

of interaction formed in the early stages of the parent-child relationship, in which children increasingly act out in response to their parents' distracted engagement, can have long-lasting implications.

Decreased Parent-Child Intimacy and Smartphone 'Escapism'

The study by Radesky et al. supports McDaniel's discussion of a vicious cycle of increased phone use and decreased parent-child intimacy: "experiencing greater parenting stress may increase parental phone use in the presence of the child which then exacerbates stressful child behavior, and the process likely continues over time" (McDaniel [2019], 74). A prominent example of this cycle is how parents respond to a child's bids for attention, which can be seen as a form of 'stressful child behaviour.' Studies have found that technologically distracted parents are slower to respond to their children's re-engagement attempts – often not even looking up from their device in order to pretend not to notice the child (Kildare and Middlemiss [2017], 589). When they do respond, some parents were reported to respond with scolding, or in a physical manner like "kicking the child's foot under the table" or "pushing the child away" (589). This greater over-reactivity in distracted parents is, as Erika Christakis argues, a result of misreading the child's emotional cues (Christakis [2018]). A tuned-out parent may be quicker to anger than an engaged one, as they are more likely to assume that a child is trying to be manipulative or difficult, when in reality they just want their parent's attention (Christakis [2018]). With technoference displacing parent-child interactions in this way, "parents may be experiencing less positive parenting experiences" (Kildare and Middlemiss [2017], 589).

These results point to the possibility of parents using their phones deliberately, prompted by certain aspects of their relationship with their child. Parents have reported turning to their mobile devices to "escape" the boredom of parenting, to self-regulate when stressed, and to seek social support when feeling isolated (Radesky et al. [2018], 311). As McDaniel writes, "many tasks throughout the day such as feeding and play can become monotonous over time – leading many parents to express they pick up their phones during these times" (McDaniel [2019], 73). One parent reported, "I usually use it as a distraction method, away from something I don't what to do," and another referred to their phone usage as a "coping mechanism" (Johnson [2017], 1429). As such, parents use phones to escape not only boredom but also some of the common stressors of parenting, such as feelings of isolation. One mom said, "If I've had a ... long day with the kids and it feels so insular... [the phone provides] the reward of... a life beyond this" (McDaniel [2019], 74). From such parent testimonials of phone use, a link is emerging between negative emotional experiences like loneliness and depression, and increased device use, especially for social media. To connect with family, friends, and others, "mothers of young children, especially first-time mothers of infants, have been shown to turn to social media and blogging" (74). Generally, connecting to the virtual world begins to seem more desirable than connecting to humans – especially during the stressful and emotionally taxing times that often come with being a new parent. This connects to Sherry Turkle's analysis of the increasing will to turn to online virtual worlds and robots to replace or enhance human interactions. Just as many people turn to various forms of escapism, such as the worlds of their digital avatars, when faced with personal challenges, so too are parents seeking online outlets to take a break from the trials of parenting. However, mobile phone usage has often been shown to have the opposite effect than what is desired, and recent survey results have linked maternal depressive symptoms specifically to increased problematic phone use among mothers (74). Phone use often leaves parents, specifically mothers, feeling worse because of social comparison and the

perception that they are wasting time – something becoming increasingly common due to the proliferation of idealistic "motherhood" social media pages (74). Therefore, while parents may be intentionally seeking out digital escapism so that they can be in a better mindset for dealing with their children, the reality is that this often has detrimental impacts on their mental wellbeing.

Given the findings of the maternal mental representations study and how phone use detracted from parents' ability to accurately report on who the child is and how they are feeling, the fact that parents are actively seeking an outlet to escape from time with their young child is concerning. Although mothers have always needed breaks from the constant care that is involved in raising a baby, this has usually come in the form of support from family members, neighbours and friends, and not in the ever-present glare of a 5-inch screen that can connect to anyone in the world. The culture of parental phone use perpetuates a narrative of children as burdens and emphasizes the need for external validation and support. As reinforced by the research, this can exacerbate the very issues in the parent-child relationship that parents are seeking to escape, and, as Bowlby might add, create long-lasting attachment gaps. If parents increasingly have less capacity to give their undivided attention to their young child, they are investing less in the relationship and implying – intentionally or not – that there are other connections or tasks that matter more than being responsive and attentive to their child. A young child in particular needs human attachment, and all the nurturing, playtime, and constant cooing that comes with it. Infant feeding, for example, is a time of "intense mother-infant bonding," and an important time for parents to cultivate a close connection with their child, unencumbered by digital distractions, that will last for the rest of their lives (Kildare and Middlemiss [2017], 589). Of course, parents must keep up with other responsibilities. But if the time they do get to spend with their child is marked by disengagement and irritability and viewed as mundane and insular, they lose some of the 'satisfaction and enjoyment' that Bowlby described as integral to a healthy relationship. If parents do not learn to pay attention and respond sensitively to their child's emotional cues, and continually seek out their phones for a "life beyond this," their attachment to their child – and consequently to their family unit as a whole – weakens.

Immediate safety issues arise with this diminishing engagement. McDaniel wrote that mothers who are distracted during infant feeding may overfeed their infants, perhaps leading to infants who do not learn to listen to their satiety cues (76). Further, he pointed out that children of parents who were distracted during developmental screening visits had higher rates of developmental delays (76). There are also problems that arise when young children have to vie for their parent's attention, given that it is more difficult to break attention from a mobile device than from other sorts of distractions (76). To re-engage a distracted parent, "unsupervised children will engage in risky, sometimes life-threatening behaviors" (Kildare and Middlemiss [2017], 588). For instance, a study in a fast food restaurant reported children making bids for their parent's attention by misbehaving, "e.g., crawling under tables or standing on chairs" (588). Unsurprisingly, as children engage in these risky and unsafe behaviours to fight the increasing hold of their parent's mobile devices, the number of child injuries has increased: "Child accident rates have risen 40% in the past five years, linked to parental neglect from technology obsession" (Rowan [2013]).

Parenting Through Surveillance Technologies

Paradoxically, increasing child accidents comes at the same time as a spike in demand for surveillance systems, as well as other apps and tracking devices, to

protect the child from external safety threats. As a result, parents' technological dependence has produced new norms of care, with parents increasingly relying on child monitoring devices as a proxy for their own presence, time and attention. Although there is a secondary emphasis on parental convenience and freedom, surveillance is predominately offered as a necessary tool of responsible and loving parenting. Through these technologies, "parents can 'care' for the child without their anachronistic physical presence" – in other words, care is being performed in modern and not 'outdated' ways (Marx and Steeves [2010], 199). This relates to the concept of the "surveillant consumer" that technology and ethics researchers Luke Stark and Karen Levy take up in their article –specifically their discussions about the *consumer-as-observer*. They describe the *consumer-as-observer* as a form of surveillant consumer that "is enabled through the market for surveillance products and systems to supervise intimate relations (children and, increasingly, the elderly) as components of a normalized, familial duty of care" (Stark and Levy [2018], 1206). Surveillance has therefore become "normatively essential to duties of care," especially in the form of parental supervision of children (1207). Stark and Levy go on to describe a number of new gadgets for parents of small children – from the Baby Milestones apps, to "smart diapers," to the Dropcam monitor – that track the baby's needs, emotions, and progress (1207-1208). In each of these cases the proponents of these products encourage consumers to act, and understand themselves, as surveillors, "responsible for both the management and the care of others" (1203). This assumes, as they quote Fisk to say, that adults are the "final arbiters of risk and appropriateness" (1210). As fears of insecurity and threats to the baby have been produced and marketed, what gets ignored are the ways in which parents' state of disengagement due to technoference are placing children at more frequent dangers than the threats surveillance technologies are designed to prevent.

It is interesting to read Stark and Levy's work on the *consumer-as-observer* in the context of parental mobile phone distraction and technoference. The obligations of parental roles appear to be shifting from needing to be emotionally and physically present with the child, to being able to supervise and track the child through the mediation of new technologies. With fears of extensive external threats, parenting becomes leveraged as a "space of anxious care," and failure to follow the sociotechnical duty of child surveillance might be construed as a failure to parent appropriately (1209-1210). In the article, Stark and Levy go on to discuss how consumers also internalize a discipline of surveillance; in other words, the reality of being watched themselves. This is potentially produced by the constant mobile connectivity that parents find themselves in today – their actions are often being broadcast through their social media use. Perhaps this prompts their desire to keep up with the latest surveillance technologies to protect their child, without questioning their own complicity in a child's (in)security through their everyday cellphone usage.

What is thus becoming increasingly normalized is a state of disengagement where attention is being taken by the phone but made acceptable due to surveillance technologies that supplement the parent's 'absence'. This is concerning because of its potential to displace the special and intimate relationship between parent and child, as childcare begins to resemble a relationship solely based in control. Parents, as Stark and Levy might suggest, are encouraged to understand themselves as surveillors, with less of a focus on the unique and intimate co-dependent relationship between parent and child. As duties of care are being performed by technology, with devices that keep track of baby's movements, linguistic inputs, and developmental status, the inherent nurturing aspects of parenting become somewhat diminished. When traditional caretaking roles

are supplemented by technologies, parents are not only given more control, but more freedom. But this narrative of freedom is ambiguous – freedom from *what*? Freedom from having to be physically present with their child and attentive to their child's needs? This rhetoric, implied in the parents' testimonials about their phone use referenced earlier in this paper, discourages parents from understanding their relationship with the child itself as liberating. Young children become positioned as a chore; a burden. As Sherry Turkle says about how we handle communication between friends, "It is sad to hear ourselves refer to letters from friends as 'to be handled' or 'gotten rid of,' the language we use when talking about garbage" (168). Similarly, while communicating through their nonengagement that the child is less valuable than whatever is on their phone and alleviating their guilt through technologies of surveillance and control, a parent's care becomes understood as something that can be supplemented or replaced by technologies. This mitigates the need for parents to develop strong human-to-human contact with their child and is a far cry from the "old world wisdom" that Cris Rowan describes – "that parent/child co-regulation leads to self-regulation," for both the parent and the child (Rowan [2013]).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the seductive lure of technology with which children must compete to capture their parent's attention is threatening the very fabric of family life as we know it. With the pervasiveness of cellphone use putting parents in what Rowan calls the "digital equivalent of the spin cycle," phones are increasingly intruding on time parents spend with their young children. In the context of attachment theory, technoference is not only impeding parents' ability to be attentive to their child, but it is also detracting from the "satisfaction and enjoyment" that parents gain from interacting with their child. Further, the vicious cycle that parental phone use perpetuates – increased child disobedience that leads to increased parent frustration and desires to 'escape' – encourages a parent's perception of their child that is less accurate and sensitive. In turning to other devices to supplement their disengagement, norms of parental care begin to get redefined.

This is an especially interesting time to study this topic, as the current generation of parents are raising their children in a technologically-driven society, yet experienced very different levels of technology – notably complete absence of smartphone use – when they were children themselves. Of course, as the parents of the future are themselves being brought up in this society of pervasive cellphone use and dependence, it will become increasingly difficult and unrealistic for parents to completely disconnect during time with their child. It is also important to acknowledge the beneficial roles that mobile technology can play in parenting and childcare – for example, it can improve work-life balance by allowing parents to work remotely, and it presents opportunities to bond with children through shared enjoyment of photography, video games, and television programs. However, parents must be cognizant of the ways in which *continued* distraction and dependence on phones has the potential to interrupt developmentally important parent-child conversation and child play.

A parent's relationship with their child is one of the most important relationships they will form in their lifetime. Critically examining how their smartphones are affecting this relationship will equip parents with the capacity to recognize and encourage improved device habits for themselves, as well as for their growing children as they too start to turn to device use in an increasingly technological world.

Author Biography

Rhea Murti graduated from McMaster's Arts & Science program in 2021 and will start law school at the University of Toronto in the fall. This paper was written as a capstone project for a Technology and Society class in her third year. Rhea was interested in, and concerned by, parents' increasing dependency on smartphones, and was keen to understand the impacts of this use on parents' relationship with their children. Rhea wanted to investigate how a device that parents often turn to as both a distraction and a support would interfere with their ability to develop a strong and healthy parent-child relationship. Rhea is grateful for the opportunity to publish this piece and hopes that it encourages readers to continue to question how society's smartphone-dependant habits may be impacting even one of the most important relationships we build in our lifetime.

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