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'It's a tiger instinct – *that's my baby!*': affective practices of care in parents' educational activism

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ABSTRACT

This article presents findings from a qualitative study exploring parents' struggles over their children's education. Drawing on affective practice theory (Wetherell 2012) and feminist care ethics (Fisher and Tronto 1990), we offer insights into the affective practices of care driving parents' educational activism. We detail how parents' activism is rooted in both powerful feelings of parental responsibility and wider, more altruistic concerns. We argue that parents' activism disrupts the binary between altruism and self-interest, indicating instead they can be mutually constitutive of collective action; a complex form of affective practice we designate *altruistic self-interest*. Our analysis suggests parental activism can be a force for progressive educational change in which care for intimates and care for others coincide, but also that educational authorities might adopt a more *care-full* approach when making key decisions affecting children, families and communities.

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Introduction

Scholars working within the feminist care ethic tradition have done much to develop our understanding of the ethical, social and political import of human relationality (Barnes 2012; Fisher and Tronto 1990). In this article we address a prominent, if not archetypal form of care – parental care. We demonstrate, however, that parents' care for their own children can open wider horizons of care in which communal responsibilities come to the fore. Our focus in this regard is qualitative data collected from parents engaged in collective struggles over their children's education. Such struggles exemplify a 'politics of everyday life' in which routine caring practices become catalysts for community-making and collective action (Jupp 2022). Through detailing how childrearing can become the basis for progressive educational activism, we thus contribute to broader discussions around the politics of care in everyday life (Barnes 2012).

There is a rich body of sociological research on parents', and particularly mothers', relationships with their children's education. Classic work in the field has explored the role of educational policies and practices in constructing maternal responsibilities and

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reproducing gendered divisions of labour (David 1980; David et al. 1993; Griffith and Smith 2005; Reay 1998). Whilst, more recently, research indicates that the ideology of ‘intensive mothering’, originally described by Hays (1998) to capture the expectations placed on affluent mothers to intensively care for all aspects of their children’s development, has become normalised both in the UK and more globally (Vincent and Maxwell 2015; Rosen and Faircloth 2020). There is also a burgeoning literature on parents’ educational relationships in the Global South (Ganguly 2022; Joiko 2021) alongside scholarship challenging ethnocentrism and heteronormativity with regards to families’ relationships with public services (Carlile and Paechter 2018; Okpokiri 2021). Parental involvement constitutes a particular focal point for research and critical work across different national contexts has explored how norms associated with parental involvement are invariably modelled on white middle-class parenting practices that work to disadvantage socially marginalized and ethnically minoritized mothers (e.g. Crozier and Davies 2007; Fakou 2024; Gewirtz 2001; Harðardóttir, Lay, and Magnúsdóttir 2023). However, despite its relevance to scholarship on home-school relations, there is relatively little work on parental activism in education, at least in the Anglophonic world. Much of the existing research in Anglophonic contexts originates from the USA (e.g. Cortez 2013; Hursh et al. 2020; Jasis 2013; Stitzlein 2015; Warren and Mapp 2011) and in Britain only a few texts address the topic (Horton and Kraffl 2009; Jupp 2022; Sibley-White 2019; Stevenson 2016; Vincent 2000). Building on our previous work in this area, which explored parents’ conflict with educational authorities (Fretwell and Barker 2023) and the pedagogical dimensions of parental activism (Fretwell forthcoming), the present article seeks to further develop the field by exploring the intertwining of parental care and educational activism.

If activism in general can be understood as the practice of undertaking action aimed at securing social or political change, then the specificity of *parental* activism, as such, resides in the fact that parental care constitutes its very *raison d’être*. It derives its meaning and its motivation, in other words, from the care parents feel towards their children. It has been argued that activism itself can be conceived as a form of care (Craddock 2021), and this would seem particularly true for parental activism. Care, moreover, is deeply affective, often inviting powerful emotions (Jupp 2022; O’Brien 2008). In this article we utilise Wetherell’s (2012) notion of ‘affective practice’ to theorise the complex patterning of care, activism, and affect in our data. We explore how affective practices of care – parents’ feelings of responsibility for their children, but also their schools and communities – drive their activism.

The article opens by outlining Wetherell’s (2012) notion of affective practice before moving on to consider methodological issues arising from studying emotions through qualitative interviewing. In subsequent sections we present our data. First, we detail how parents’ activism is rooted in care for their own children and thus can be initially seen to constitute a form of self-interested action. In the next section, however, we deepen this account by exploring data suggesting that self-interested motivations are often coupled with altruistic concerns, such as care for the wider school community and beyond. We argue that this blurring of self-interest and altruism challenges the traditional dichotomy between the two and indicates instead that they can be mutually constitutive of collective action; a complex form of affective practice we designate *altruistic self-interest*. Finally, we consider challenges associated with pursuing campaigns and their impact on family life. In conclusion we argue that parental care can be a powerful source for progressive collective action and

that educational authorities might adopt a more *care-full* approach when engaging with their constituents (Barnes 2012).

Affective practice

Margaret Wetherell's (2012) work on affective practice represents a novel contribution to affect theory that is distinctive for its pragmatic approach to exploring how emotion and affect figure in everyday lives. Adopting a practice approach, Wetherell contends, attunes us to how 'affect is embodied, situated and operates psychologically' (2012, 159). It calls attention to the embodied, interactional and intersubjective nature of affect, alongside its entwining with social practices that reveal forms of order, patterning and routine. The affective practice approach captures the complexity of situated affect by exploring the work that emotions do in social life and how bodily feelings, discursive sense-making, social norms and cultural practices become articulated together in even the most mundane everyday experiences (Wetherell 2012). The value of such an approach lies precisely in its ability to conceptualise this entanglement of factors and to think them simultaneously.

Wetherell (2012) departs from theories that conceptualise affect as a 'pre-personal extra-discursive force' and which treat emotion as a mere epiphenomenon of primordial affect (e.g. Massumi 2002), by contending instead that affect is best understood as 'embodied meaning making'. As embodied social actors, human beings, for Wetherell, are always already immersed in social, cultural and discursive processes through which they make sense of their affective lives. It is through communication we make sense of affect for ourselves and for others, that affect is evaluated and accrues significance, or, alternatively, is subject to power and constrained. Thus, the discursive aspect of affect ought not be jettisoned if our goal is to comprehend everyday social action. Sharp ontological distinctions between emotion and affect are also difficult to maintain (Wetherell 2012; Ahmed 2014). Instead, we might view them as two faces of the same ontological coin, as capturing complementary aspects of a single ontological contiguity. Or, to use Ahmed's metaphor, 'You can break an egg to separate the yolk from the white, but you have to separate what is not separate' (Schmitz and Ahmed 2014, 98-99). None of this requires us to revert to traditional conceptions of emotions as simply residing within us as 'something an individual does and as something an individual owns' (Wetherell 2012, 95). Affective experiences are simultaneously somatic, subjective and social. They exist only *in relation*, as bodies meet and interact with the world. They are also recursive; shaping, whilst also being shaped by, the wider social context. Affective practices are complex assemblages that are given pattern by social and cultural regimens for the doing of emotion in given contexts as well as our own personal biographies and histories.

In practical terms, moreover, the language of emotion was the language of our participants. Our data were replete with emotion-talk; indeed, it was often how parents made sense of their experiences. It is thus important to retain the language of emotion, not simply because it carries 'everyday resonance' (Schmitz and Ahmed 2014, 97), but because it has analytical purchase with respect to our data. Our concern is to elucidate the situated workings of affect within parents' educational activism. In particular, we detail how parents' narratives were grounded in affective practices of care: care for their children, schools, and communities. The vigour of which, as we demonstrate, can channel care into forms of political action, into caring activism.

Methodological considerations

The article draws on qualitative data collected between 2018 and 2020 from three parent-led campaign groups: *Protect Children's Education (PCE)*,¹ a campaign challenging funding cuts to education, and *Eastborough Anti-Academisation Coalition (EAC)* and the *Crowley Parents' Campaign (CPC)*, both of which opposed the academisation of local schools.² Methods included semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and observations of campaign events. The sample comprised 16 parents, seven each from EAC and PCE, and the two mothers leading CPC. In addition, we also interviewed three 'campaign advocates', individuals who supported parent campaigns, and a campaigner co-ordinator from EAC who was heavily involved but not themselves a parent with children at the contested schools. The following discussion explores methodological issues arising from attending to affect in qualitative interviews.

Emotion-talk figured prominently in our data. Parents articulated a range of feelings regarding their activities and generally found campaigning to be a deeply moving experience, as Mina (CPC) attested: 'we've had some madness, some tears, some laughter; every emotion that you could go through with this journey, we've sat there and done it'. To analyse this rich tapestry of emotion-talk we first used NVivo software to code interviews according to various emotion categories. A second stage of analysis involved revisiting the original recordings, transcripts and field notes to create 'affect maps' for each interview. Essentially, this involved noting occurrences of emotion within the interviews and tabulating the resulting data on Excel to enable comparison across the data set. Attention was paid to both past tense reporting of emotion and to instances of 'direct emoting' where participants became emotional in the interview itself, with each being recorded on the maps. Each map was then cross-referenced with the initial NVivo analysis before being collated to create matrices for each campaign in order to pursue more fine-grained exploration of the affective contours of each (Fretwell and Barker 2023).

Recording and analysing emotion is not a straightforward process. A key issue concerns the adequacy of the coding and of the emotion categories deployed during the analytical process. Feelings do not always arrive in neat packages of emotion; they can be indeterminate and mix in complex and contradictory ways (McLeod 2016; Wetherell 2012). This indeterminacy and the potential imprecision of familiar emotion categories needs to be acknowledged. Our task is simpler when participants themselves draw on familiar emotion categories and we can retain their own language, but often participants' accounts can be threaded with emotive language without thereby specifically naming particular emotions. In such cases we have to make inductive sense of the emotions at play. This is particularly acute where direct emoting is concerned. The challenge being how best to interpret body language, facial expressions, vocal cues, and so on, in light of what participants say and in terms of conventional emotion categories. Again, this is an interpretative process and should always be considered provisional rather than conclusive.

Another issue concerns the reliance on retrospection rather than capturing affect 'in the moment' as such. To be sure, after-the-event narratives will only ever produce partial accounts of affect and more innovative methods might be used to capture embodied data (Wetherell 2012). Nevertheless, recounting memories, experiences and events can elicit new affective episodes. Indeed, we might view the research interview as a generative affective encounter in its own right, not a mere substitute for 'real' affect (McLeod 2016; Wetherell

2012). Parents not only discussed their emotional experiences with us, they also re-lived them in the moment. At many points parents became emotional *during* the interviews, they directly emoted their feelings of anger and frustration, etc. Affective practice helps us explain this *doubling of emotion*, where parents experienced afresh the lived emotions of activism, as a form of affective-discursive loop through which affect and discourse recursively combine to engender and intensify emotion (Wetherell 2012). In encouraging participants to recall, recollect, and revisit their experiences, we are also inviting them to feel them again. Qualitative interviews are thus potential sites for both the expression *and* production of emotion.

Doing it for the children: care as a driver for parents' activism

In this section we begin unpacking parents' motivations for engaging in activism. Our starting point is the notion of care as it has been articulated in the feminist care ethic tradition (Barnes 2012; Fisher and Tronto 1990). To care, and care well, we not only have to *care about* others and be attentive to their needs we also have to accept responsibility to *care for* them (Fisher and Tronto 1990). Care, in other words, requires action; it is a practice, a doing. Wetherell (2012) writes that affective practices are distinctive for the role emotions play therein and caring practices clearly qualify given their endowment with feeling and emotion. Indeed, in the absence of such feelings we might doubt we are in fact dealing with care. Care can thus be read as a form of affective practice. Attentiveness to others' needs indicates that we have been *affected* by them, whilst taking on responsibilities for care implies that we have been subsequently *moved* to act in order to serve those needs.

In this study we focus on a species of care – parental care – that appears emblematic of care relations. However, Fisher and Tronto (1990) caution against treating family care as paradigmatic since it invokes a 'naturalistic interpretation of caring' that risks reinforcing essentialist perspectives on the 'natural' caring propensities of women (Fisher and Tronto 1990). We are aware of such dangers and seek to guard against them. Whilst it is true that the majority of participants were women (10 out of 16 parents), the affective practices of care we outline here were articulated by mothers and fathers alike. Moreover, although parents linked their activism to feelings of parental responsibility, this was a complex process equally informed by relationships with their children's schools and local area/community; their personal situations, histories and biographies; the way they were individually and collectively treated by educational authorities; and their conception of what constitutes 'good' parenting, rather than automatically flowing from some purportedly natural tendency as such.

If we wish to understand why people become involved in activism, then we need to know what it is they care about (Jasper 1997). For parents in the present study, this revolved around their sense of responsibility for their children. As Jenny, a campaigner co-ordinator with EAC, expressed it: 'Parents will fight for something that they believe in, for their kids.' Chris, one of the 'campaign advocates' we spoke to, who himself had led a campaign around school funding, put it even more bluntly: 'there's no more sort of self-interested/selfish attitude than parents' concern for their children, so [our campaign] tapped into very deep, very deep feelings of, you know, self-interest.' Similar sentiments were echoed across the wider data-set. Aminul (EAC) indicated that tapping into parents' desire to want the best for their children was a key mobilising factor. 'At the end of the day,' he remarked, 'that is the reason behind everything.' A point Keith also emphasised:

...as a parent that's your main concern, is your kid's education, which is where – I think this is why [EAC] has been such a successful, well one of the reasons, it's brought in people that have never been politically active before because it's something that's affecting them, it's affecting their kids and I think this is how people do become politically active. (Keith, EAC)

Self-interest played a more muted role in the PCE campaign opposing funding cuts to education, but even here we were afforded a sense for how parental care is mobilised for activism. Yara discussed how opposing cuts is 'an easy thing for all parents to sort of rally behind in that their children are being short-changed, quite literally'. Whilst Peter indicated that having children had impressed on him that 'one thing you would go to jail or die for is your kids' and that such sentiments drove his engagement.

The argument here is that parents' care for their own children, their familial self-interest, plays a key motivating role. This was often framed as a desire to protect their children's interests. As Molly articulates:

[T]his is what it boils down to me for me: as a mum my job is to protect my children [...] Now, when I take my children to school, education yeah absolutely top of, it's so important, but it's not; when I'm entrusting my world to somebody else, yeah, the most important thing is that I know you're being honest with me and that we trust each other and you're going to keep that child safe; whatever they learn is a bonus. Because I am giving you everything I hold dear. Every time I take my children to that school, I'm basically giving you the other part of my heart that is walking around outside my body. There is nothing more precious that I could actually hand over to somebody and do so willingly, that's the thing. And for me as a parent to actually send my children to a school or the thought of the people that I'm actually dealing with, these CEOs, and the responses I've had and the behaviour that I've had – you should see the emails I've been sent, they're actually abusive, okay. The thought that they actually might ever be near my kids terrifies me. (Molly, CPC)

We see in Molly's account how deeply felt the desire was to protect her children. Her children are that 'other part of my heart that is walking around outside my body' and she views it as her responsibility as a mother to protect them. As she put it elsewhere in the interview: 'It's a tiger instinct – *that's my baby!*' We also see here how specific patterns of affect can become hardened. Wetherell (2012, 14) suggests that affective practices can 'be very densely knotted in with connected social practices where the degree of knitting reinforces the affect and can make it resistant and durable, sometimes unbearably so'. Molly's activism was spurred by the desire to protect her children, but her subsequent ill-treatment, and the fear this provoked, reinforced her disquiet with the situation, ingrained feelings of indignation and injustice, and strengthened her resolve to continue fighting. This was a pattern we found repeated across the anti-academisation campaigns' data. Parents' desire to protect their children's interests fostered an 'oppositional consciousness' (Mansbridge and Morris 2001) which hardened as they found their goals frustrated by hostile authorities.

Parent's activism was also closely allied with what they considered 'good' parenting. Undertaking to protect children's interests and fight on their behalf was a way in which they sought to present themselves as good parents. It was a way to demonstrate they cared:

I think amongst the core group, there's an element of wanting to demonstrate to our children that we are people who will stand up for stuff and we're women who'll stand up for stuff and fight for stuff that's important and to demonstrate to them that they need to stand up for what they believe in as well. (Rose, PCE)

Similar findings are reported in wider research on parental activism. In her study of mothers campaigning for their disabled children, Panitch (2008) recounts how parents' campaigns were driven and sustained by care, but also enabled mothers to develop a sense of efficacy and self-esteem outside the domestic sphere by showing that 'good mothering' could involve advocacy work beyond the confines of their own homes. Craddock's (2021) research on anti-austerity activism also documents how mothers' feelings of emotional and moral responsibility became key drivers for engaging in activism. Whilst Howard, Howell, and Jamieson's (2018) discussion of parental activism in the context of climate change protests again indicates that parents were morally driven by the desire to protect their children's futures. As our own data and such examples indicate, parental activism is closely interwoven with practices of care that are themselves given shape and form by strong moral emotions (Jasper 2018). Insofar as it is bound up with a desire to care for and protect their children, parental activism is thus grounded in familial self-interest. Affective practices of care act as key drivers for engaging in activism. However, this is only part of the story revealed by our data, for as we discuss in the next section familial self-interest was often coupled in complex ways with more altruistic motivations.

For one and all: altruistic self-interest

We document above how familial self-interest drives parents' activism. However, parents' accounts revealed that care for others also played an important role. Indeed, altruistic and self-interested motivations coincided in complex ways within parents' narratives. Parents assumed caring responsibilities both for their own children *and* the wider community. They acted, that is, for one and all. We term this complex form of affective practice *altruistic self-interest*. Such a term seems counter-intuitive, contradictory, an oxymoron even, given that Western moral thinking tends to treat altruism and self-interest as binary opposites. Yet, for all they might be conceptually distinguished, concrete social action is more indeterminate than such a distinction would admit. Just as bodily feelings and sensations can bleed across different emotion categories (Wetherell 2012), we also find that affective practices of care can blend ostensibly contrary impulses. The point here is that parents' self-interest is enmeshed with care for others. It may be that one or other is accentuated depending on the context, but they hang together and cannot be neatly uncoupled. Even Chris' assertion that we drew upon in the previous section – that 'there's no more sort of self-interested/selfish attitude than parents' concern for their children' – was subsequently qualified and linked to wider conceptions of care. Being a parent, he commented, expands one's feelings of responsibility: 'You do genuinely have someone that you put before yourself over everything and that makes you...you feel much more invested in your community as well. So, you're much more invested in them and their future, but much more invested in your local community'. Parents' activism, we argue, then, appears neither straightforwardly egoistic nor straightforwardly altruistic but is instead an alloy of both impulses. It is precisely this complex that *altruistic self-interest* is designed to capture. It effaces the traditional opposition between its constituent terms, where one or other is usually proffered as a fundamental explanation for human behaviour (Mansbridge 1990), by gesturing instead to more ambiguous motives for action in which familial self-care and care for others coincide. It recognises, moreover, that it is difficult to neatly parcel individual from group benefits where collective action is

concerned. The goals of collective action, in this respect, 'are not quite self-interest and not quite altruism – or they are both at the same time' (Jasper 2018, 107).

We are not the first to draw attention to the complex interplay of altruism and self-interest in parental activism. Vincent (2000) observes how they entwine in ways that are difficult to disentangle. Likewise, Naples (1998) work on 'activist mothering' details how mothers' care for their own children extended to encompass 'community caretaking' where nurturing work was undertaken outside of their immediate kinship group. Altruistic self-interest, in this regard, involves a broadening of what Ruddick terms the 'passionate particularity' of mothering, where care for the family opens into wider horizons of care: 'a move from one's own to 'other', from local to more general' (Ruddick, cited in Vincent 2000). A move we see in Panitch's (2008) study of mother's disability activism as well as Jupp's (2022) work on anti-austerity activism.

There were numerous examples of altruistic self-interest in our data, but each campaign had a different inflection. The most straightforwardly altruistic campaign was PCE. This was a campaign largely composed of middle class parents from professional backgrounds with access to considerable resources. Reflecting on the groups' motivations for campaigning, Lynn indicated that:

I think it comes from a caring place; it comes from a caring place and most of the people I campaign with, like me, can do right by their own children. We're doing this for the kids in [deprived area] who only get to ride a bike when they have a Bikeability class and bikes get brought in. (Lynn, PCE)

As parents educating their children within the state sector, PCE campaigners' families would clearly benefit from any successful attempt to secure more adequate resourcing. Nevertheless, they tended to emphasise the altruistic motivations behind their campaign and the wider social benefits success would bring.

Within the anti-academisation campaigns we find more explicit examples of altruistic self-interest. In both EAC and CPC, parents' immediate concern for their own children was enmeshed with wider concerns about the impact academisation would have on the community and future generations. Speculating on what had sustained parents' involvement, Floyd commented that:

For me, I think, and for other parent – I might not speak for them, but that's what feeling I get – that they don't want to be blamed, they don't want to be blamed, they want to protect the future of their children now and for the next generation, their grandkids and all that stuff, and they don't want to stand aside. (Floyd, EAC)

Isra (EAC) also regarded her family's interests as bound up with that of the wider community: 'we have children in that school, we want the best for our kids, we want the best for the rest of the children, for the community'. Whilst Jenny remarked that the impulse to protect their children and their communities could be a powerful motivating factor:

The understanding that you are fighting for something for your children and for your community is a very powerful spur to articulate what you want, and you can feel [...] how so many people are feeling their way towards that, to articulate to the outside world what is important to them. (Jenny, Campaign Coordinator, EAC)

For parents across the anti-academisation campaigns there was a strong feeling that an injustice was being perpetrated against their children, schools and communities. As Mina (CPC) presented it, 'we wanted the truth to come out and we wanted people to understand that there is an injustice being done to the children at this school, and to the teachers and to the headteacher'.

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that parents were deeply emotionally invested in these campaigns. Strong feelings of care, as well indignation, fear and anxiety underpinned their activism. Witness Molly's reflection on her commitment to halt the Crowley conversion:

It's because it's right. I can't sleep. I feel sick. The amount of tears I've shed – I've actually cried, yeah, and I could. It makes me feel so... *we have to*. There is no choice in this. If we don't the people that are going to suffer are not me and you, it's people like – you know when you look at that playing and that innocence? You're stealing, you're stealing from children; you're robbing them of something that's so precious. And you could never get that back. And, like I said, they're borrowed to us our kids. (Molly, CPC)

Molly clearly cares for all those at the school that would be adversely impacted by the planned conversion, not just her own children. However, the full complexities of altruistic self-interest come into sharper relief in a second interview conducted with Molly and Mina after their campaign had ended and they had failed in their bid to prevent the school converting.

And you know what, part of my attitude is, you know what, I'm so glad, because I did it for my kids. I actually didn't do it for any social status, I didn't do it for anyone else, I did it for my kids and I did it for them staff in there. And the reason I did it for them staff in there as well is because they were putting my kids first, yeah? I didn't do it to make friends. And then, you know, I did it for my and everyone else's kids, because all kids should be treated the same and I knew what was going on was a hundred per cent wrong, no matter what anyone else saw or didn't see. And I don't regret it for a minute. I wish it had been easier, but I definitely would not put as much pressure on myself doing it again. (Molly, CPC)

Molly laments here how relationships with fellow campaigners had waned after the campaign concluded. There was evidence here of direct emoting. Molly's sadness revealing itself in changes in body language, countenance, and the tempo of her account. But what really stands out is the tension in the rationale she offers for why she became involved in the campaign. Feeling abandoned by her fellow campaigners causes her to question her original motives and re-consider exactly on whose behalf she had committed so much energy. Her responsibility for her own children comes to the fore, but even here, in this rather dejected retrospection, we see how familial self-interest remains coupled with concern for others.

Activism can also involve making sacrifices. It can force people into making difficult choices. We gain a dramatic insight into how altruistic self-interest can invite contrary feelings in the following example where a parent makes the difficult decision to forgo her family's immediate interests for the good of the campaign.

I mean, there was an issue in the school in the December – our son, he slipped at school and ripped his lip – seven stitches. Really significant – at nursery. But I didn't feel able to challenge. Ordinarily, I would have done, but I was having this fight already. I mean, I feel guilty about it, but I didn't feel like I could challenge it, because, I feel like, 'Oh God, I'm already a troublemaker, if I then say 'Look, how the hell does a four year old slip on water in nursery?' [...] So there were things – sacrifices we made along the way [...] because you can't fight

every... you can't. But I still look at him today and see the stitches and just think, 'Oh my God,' 'Mummy, is that ever going to go.' It's like... I made a choice, I chose the battle and I chose one that would benefit the many rather than the one, do you know what I mean? (Aalia, EAC)

Despite the desire to protect her child, Aalia felt compelled to set her aside her own immediate familial self-interest in favour of the greater good. This was a difficult, emotionally fraught decision that provoked feelings of guilt. Aalia's response was not un-caring, though, rather it points to tensions that often attend caring responsibilities. Care requires accepting a responsibility to act, but this can involve delicate judgements about priorities and require suspending one's more immediate concerns (Barnes 2020a). Even here, though, such action is not purely altruistic, since Aalia and her family will benefit from the campaign, should it prove successful. Instead, we see the complex interplay between two ostensibly contrary motives that we describe as altruistic self-interest. Aalia's was not the only instance where parents had to suspend their families' immediate needs and, indeed, as we have discussed elsewhere (Fretwell and Barker 2023), if self-interest were parents' ultimate motive, then they would perhaps be better served by not becoming involved in campaigning in the first place. Not least because it can be significantly disruptive for family life, as we discuss in the next section.

The impact of activism upon family life

Neoliberalism tends to promote a culture of parenting that prioritises the pursuit of familial advantage (Fretwell and Barker 2023). We might expect from this that parents would place their families' interests above all else. However, as Aalia's example suggests, altruistic and self-interested motivations combine in complex ways that can require the suspension of families' immediate concerns. Neoliberal presumptions regarding self-interested action are further belied once we consider contradictions arising from parental activism.

Although parents were fighting campaigns on behalf of their families, balancing family life and activism proved to be challenging and required careful negotiation with intimate others. As Mark and Floyd indicate:

So, it does take a toll on you as a family, because its, you only have that many hours per day to do your job, to do the housework, to cook, to look after children, and then [...] I have to be a campaigner, I have to go to meetings, you have to wake up early in the morning to pick kids, you know. [...] Oh, man, it's more than a full-time job. And within that fitting all those in, it's tough, it's *really, really tough*, it's hard. It's one of the hardest thing you can do, I think, you know [...] You're like a ping-pong ball played around six tables, yeah: one ping-pong ball – bom, bom, bom, bom, bom, bom, bom, bom [...] So, it creates a strain with my family. There are times when my wife says, 'How long are you going to be doing this for', you know. And it's relentless, no stopping. So, it's hard, it's tough. If I didn't have a wife that understand I would be out of a relationship, I'm telling you. (Floyd, EAC)

But, you know, with my wife, it can be a bit of a strain on your partner, because it takes time and time together is important. And so, you know, with me I tend to get quite obsessive on a point. I can't stop, right. And so, I'll be up at night, two o'clock, three o'clock whatever, researching and that then leaves me tired in the days sometimes [laughs]. And then, you know, my wife can get a little bit fed up at that and also going out to meetings in the evenings, you know, that can put a bit of a strain on relations. (Mark, EAC)

Craddock (2021) contends that activism can generate gender inequalities by placing additional domestic burdens on mothers, and this would seem to be reflected in the accounts above.

However, both fathers indicated being the primary caregiver within their households, thus we might see their challenges as speaking instead to the difficulty of managing complex 'affective performances' where they have to balance competing identities as husbands, fathers, and activists (Newman 2017). Nevertheless, some caution ought to be exercised here as research indicates that men's contribution to domestic labour can often be overstated (Reay 1998; Van Hoof 2011). Moreover, as Brooks and Hodkinson (2022) observe, traditional gender roles may be reinforced even in families where fathers act as primary caregivers, particularly where educational responsibilities are concerned. As Craddock (2021) urges, then, we need to think carefully about the uneven gendered impact of activism. Elsewhere in the data, for instance, we saw how mothers' involvement could unsettle normative expectations of caregiving within families:

My husband is like, yeah, he's really supportive, but he's a bit like, 'Really, it's like midnight and you're still sending emails and stuff'. He's like, 'What're you doing?' you know. So, he can get a bit like irritated by it. I'm like, 'Oh, I'm going to London on Saturday to like a campaign thing, you've got the kids, alright?' He's like, 'Really?'. Yeah [laughs]. (Carole, PCE)

Although Carole indicates her husband is 'really supportive', it is nevertheless clear that her campaigning necessitated a seemingly unwelcome renegotiation of domestic care.

For some parents, like Molly, the impact on family life was even more acute. As a single mother with underlying health issues, who early in the campaign was living in temporary accommodation, Molly's personal situation meant that campaigning generated significant domestic, material and emotional pressures:

I'm constant, literally constantly, constantly, constantly working - it feels like a full-time job. Every single day I have sent thousands of emails, thousands; the amount of hours that have gone into this not intentionally but just because that's what's happened. It has taken over my whole life. There have been times when I feel bad on my kids and I've thought, 'Poor little fuckers - sorry - I thought poor little things; oh, late home again, they're tired'. And it is tiring campaigning; it is when I'm not in a settled situation. I haven't got a man there to look after the kids. I haven't got someone I can leave with them to go to a meeting. I haven't got any financial support. (Molly, CPC)

Here, again, we see tensions surrounding activism as a form of care. To sustain her campaign Molly had to set aside her children's immediate needs, which subsequently generated feelings of guilt and remorse. Her co-campaigner, Mina, however, resolved this issue in the opposite direction by prioritising her children and lessening her involvement in the campaign. Such examples offer insights into the complexities of altruistic self-interest as an affective practice of care. Parents' emotional investments may often coincide, but they can also generate tensions which cannot be resolved without inviting adverse consequences; either by creating emotional burdens or impacting the campaign itself.

It can also be difficult to sustain activism over the longer term and burnout remains a persistent concern (Brown and Pickerill 2009). For many parents the strain of campaigning led to exhaustion. Yara (PCE) mentioned that burnout was 'a real worry' and in some cases forced parents to reconsider their involvement. Rose (PCE) conceded, for instance, that her energy to continue campaigning had waned somewhat. The campaign, she reflected, required 'lots of time and quite a lot of stress, and we're all trying to do it around everything else. So, some of the stuff has just been mentally ambitious and that's quite hard. We can't sustain that in the same way really'. In other cases, though, parents' deep emotional investment in the campaigns sustained their efforts even in the face of exhaustion:

[I]t's relentless, very hard, very tough. I saw parents who are exhausted, who were looking after children and they're doing campaign, who are working, you know, but they were relentless. (Floyd, EAC)

But I think...there were so many times at various points we all felt like, 'No more. I can't do this.' But we knew that if one of us fell back we would break, so the five of us had to keep going regardless. (Aalia, EAC)

Undoubtedly, as many participants attested, the challenge of balancing campaigning with competing responsibilities increases potential for burnout. However, parents' passion and determination, alongside the responsibility they felt for their children and communities, largely sustained their efforts.

Conclusion

This article has explored parental activism in education as a complex form of affective practice in which care for intimates and care for others coincide in what we have termed *altruistic self-interest*. The initial impulse for engaging in activism is located in parents' desires to protect their children's interests, but we also see how parental care broadens out into forms of community action and empowerment that can have significant social, cultural, and political effects. Some of the campaigns had clear successes. PCE campaigners claimed to have played a key role in publicising the impact funding cuts were having on schools and arguably influenced the decision to increase school funding following the 2017 General Election. EAC managed to halt several planned conversions and even secured a commitment from the local authority to abandon further plans to academise local schools. CPC, however, was less fortunate and despite campaigners' efforts the school converted to academy status in late 2019. Irrespective of whether they achieved their primary goal or not, though, these campaigns attest to the power of grassroots educational activism. They fostered civic capacity within their locales, galvanised and inspired their communities, and created networks for future collaboration. In this regard, families can be important forces for positive, progressive change. Parents in our study were responding to what they viewed as *care-less* policies and authorities and fighting for the right to contribute to key decisions affecting their children's and communities' futures. We argue that a more *care-full* approach is required. Educational policy and decision-making ought to be guided by an 'emotional morality' (Barnes 2020b). It ought to respect parents' feelings, heed their concerns, and appreciate that schools are deeply affective spaces within local communities (Keynes et al. 2024).

Notes

1. Further particulars about the campaigns appear in Fretwell and Barker (2023). Pseudonyms have been used throughout for all relevant proper names, including those of the campaigns themselves. Ethical approval was secured from our host institution.
2. Academies are independent from local education authorities and operate as not-for-profit companies often under sponsorship of other organisations (e.g. faith groups) and/or as Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs). Schools can voluntarily convert to academies and join/form a MAT or can be forced to convert if they are deemed 'under-performing'. Of the anti-academisation campaigns considered here – CPC and EAC – the first concerns a case of forced conversion and the latter voluntary conversion.

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