

‘Manic Mums’ and ‘Distant Dads’? Gendered geographies of care and the journey to school

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Research in the geographies of care has identified the central role of mothers in caring for children, although much less explored are the experiences of men who also participate in care. Drawing upon research conducted in the UK with children and their families, this paper contributes to existing debates in the geographies of care by exploring a relatively new space of caring, namely the escort of primary school children to and from school and other settings. The paper explores mothers’ and fathers’ involvement in escorting children, the extent and nature of participation and also how distinct gendered forms of caring practices are established. In doing so, the paper also considers the importance of place and local cultures of parenting which inform these gendered carescapes.

Keywords: Care; Children; Parents; Mobility; Place

Introduction

The recently emerging geographies of care literature have led to a re-examination of how geography is central to care and the caring relationship (Power, 2008). There is an increasing recognition of how “care and caring are thoroughly social activities and always constituted by aspects of places in which they occur” (Parr and Philo, 2003, p472). The geographies of care have begun exploring the processes of caring in its many different configurations and guises (Williams, 2002 and Parr and Philo, 2003), exploring the daily geography of practices of care, including the “micro-politics of care negotiation” (Dyck et al. 2005, p174, see also Johnsen et al., 2005 and Power, 2008). The moral landscapes of care have also been begun to be mapped, identifying how spaces of care are imagined by different people in different ways (Johnsen et al., 2005) and how place is important in developing care arrangements (Milligan, 2003). How individuals are cared for is increasingly influenced by numerous networks, linking people, organisations and institutions (Bosco, 2007). Support networks available to carers are contingent upon their spatial location (Milligan, 2000).

The literature has also explored different spaces of caring, including homes, streets and institutions (Parr and Philo, 2003 and Johnsen et al., 2005). There has been a geographical refocus as the provision of caring has re-centred from institutions to home in a shift from formal to informal care (Milligan, 2000). Research has explored how the home has become the primary site for various forms of caring for “nearest and dearest” (Cummins and Milligan, 2000 and Dyck et al., 2005). Care plays a significant role in the generation and experience of home environments (Williams, 2002). Although home-based caring practices can encompass care for individuals across all stages of the life-cycle, one important everyday manifestation of this is parents’ care of dependent children (Power, 2008; Bosco, 2007)

The geographies of children and youth is a rapidly expanding sub-discipline in human geography. Geographers have played a key role in the development of the new social studies

of childhood, an approach (although not without critique, see Horton and Kraftl, 2005 and Vanderbeck, 2008), which has led to a radical reconceptualisation of academic considerations regarding childhood (James, Jenks and Prout, 1998). Childhood is seen as a social construction, historically and culturally specific and subject to diversity, rather than a universal biological category (Matthews and Limb, 1999). Drawing upon parallel international political processes such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, children are seen as beings in their own right, as competent social actors who can make sense of, and comment upon their everyday lives (Skelton, 2007).

As well as exploring the importance of place in differentiating childhoods, and mapping everyday spaces of childhood, children's geographers have begun to consider how children travel between these different spaces of childhood (e.g. see Collins and Kearns, 2001, Porter, 2002 and Benwell, 2009). Although mobility has been an often undervalued concept in the social sciences, there has been a growing interest in children and mobility (Collins and Kearns, 2001, Kearns et al., 2003 and Barker et al., 2009) as part of the new mobilities paradigm (Urry, 2000).

Over the past few decades, children's independent mobility has declined, as the proportion of children aged under 10/11 undertaking travel activities outside the home (such as crossing main roads or cycling) alone has declined significantly (see Hillman et al., 1990, Valentine and McKendrick, 1997 and O'Brien et al., 2000). This corresponds with an increase in the proportion of children's journeys escorted by parents. The proportion of primary school children travelling to school unescorted fell from 15% in 1989 to 6% in 2005 (DfT, 2005). Parents are escorting their children up to a later age, and the transition to secondary school is increasingly seen as a watershed in children's independent spatial mobility (O'Brien et al., 2000). A decline in the proportion of primary school children walking to school, from 61% in 1988 to 51% in 2006, corresponds with an increase in the proportion driven to school, from 27% in 1988 to 41% in 2006 (DfT, 2007). Whereas previously the majority of primary school children have had autonomy to walk to school, these recent trends have created new spaces of caring and new responsibilities for parents.

However, children's increasing dependence on cars and lack of independent mobility is seen as increasingly problematic. In addition to concerns regarding children's physical health (see Chinn and Rona, 2001 and BMA, 2005), are the high accident rates of 11/12 year olds, who, when beginning to travel to secondary school unaccompanied, are often not used to walking without escort (DfT, 2005). Driving children to school also contributes to congestion. At the height of the morning peak hour, up to 18% of cars on urban roads are escorting children to school (DfT, 2005). In response to these issues, the UK government has set a 2010 target for each school to have a 'School Travel Plan', which typically focuses upon a combination of street engineering, education and training, and initiatives such as the 'walking bus', to reduce dependence on cars for the journey to school (Collins and Kearns, 2001 and Barker, 2003).

Escorting children to and from school and other places is largely the responsibility of women, as part of the broader range of 'carescapes', that is the wide variety of caring tasks undertaken both within and outside of the domestic sphere (Bowlby et al., 1997, Law, 1999

and Dowling, 2000). Despite the increasing proportion of mothers returning to paid employment, women still remain responsible for most caring tasks, including escorting children (McDowell, 2004 and Dowling, 2000). Geographers have also identified how parenting and care are social processes not simply influenced by individual preference or family expectations but is also informed by local cultures and social networks (Dyck, 1990, Holloway, 1998 and Ross, 2002). These local cultures of parenting are defined as:

Firstly, a cluster of beliefs, attitudes and symbols attached to mothering, and secondly the practices that result. (Dowling, 2000, p347)

These cultures of parenting are, by their definition, local and spatially variable (Dyck, 1990 and Holloway, 1998). Whilst research has begun to map how shifting gender relations may have impacted upon mothers' and fathers' roles in different aspects of family life, for example, involvement in domestic tasks (Windebank, 2001) or children's education (West et al., 1998), little research has considered gendered carescapes in relation to escorting children (see Law, 1999, Dowling, 2000 as exceptions). Hence this paper aims to contribute to debates within the geographies of care by exploring these new spaces of caring, mapping how these new configurations of care are negotiated and managed within families. In exploring the accounts of mothers and fathers, the paper contributes to a more thorough gendered reading of geographies of care and to a more considered reflection on the changing ways in which men and women undertake caring tasks. In particular, existing literature has not explored fathers' involvement in care tasks, nor the links between local cultures of parenting, gendered carescapes and the care and escort of children. It is this gap in research which this paper hopes to contribute to filling.

Methods

The research was undertaken in five UK primary schools, three within Buckinghamshire, a predominantly affluent and rural county north west of London, and two within the London Borough of Enfield, a mixed, mostly suburban area on the northern fringe of London. Of the three Buckinghamshire schools, Rural Hillⁱ and Village Bottom were both located in affluent villages in the south east of the county, surrounded by fields protected by green belt legislationⁱⁱ. These two wards could be labelled as 'rural', although such terms are highly contested and debated, and are ideological concepts as much as indicators of population density (Matthews et al., 2000). Table 1 shows Rural Hill and Village Bottom had high proportions of households from social class one and two, low levels of unemployment and households in social housing and near universal levels of car ownership. A higher than average proportion of women engaged in paid employment. Both had low proportions of households from minority ethnic groups³ and lower than average levels (9-10%) of children with special educational needs. In contrast, the third Buckinghamshire school, Suburban Royal, located on a large 1960s housing estate on the edge of a large industrial town, reported higher than average unemployment rates, and the lowest levels of car ownership and proportions of households from social class one and two amongst the sample. There were lower rates of women's participation in paid employment, and higher than average proportions of households from minority ethnic groups. Community languages included

Punjabi, Urdu, Gujarati and Hindi. Of the five locations, it had the highest proportion (19%) of children with special educational needs. Most children lived within one mile of the school

Table 1: Key statistics for research locations

| Area | Ward-level population | Per cent of ward-level respondents from minority ethnic groups | Unemployment rate (%) | Per cent of women aged 17-74 economically active (%)* | Percentage of households owning a car | Proportion of households from social class one and two | Proportion of households in local authority/housing association accommodation | Per cent of pupils obtaining free school meals** | per cent of pupils stated** |
|----------------|--------------------------------|--|-----------------------|---|---------------------------------------|--|---|--|-----------------------------|
| Rural Hill | 2183 | 1.5 | 2.1 | 71.03 | 93.1 | 41.4 | 8 | <1 | 10 |
| Village Bottom | 4192 | 4 | 1.8 | 73.78 | 94.9 | 47.2 | 7.2 | <1 | 9 |
| Suburban Royal | 9328 (part of town 119000) | 14.1 | 4 | 67.24 | 67.3 | 21.2 | 41.3 | 4 | 19 |
| Country Wood | 12536 | 16.9 | 3 | 63.4 | 76 | 33.6 | 13.1 | 1 | 15 |
| Common Green | 13197 (part of Greater London) | 22.6 | 4.4 | 67.7 | 73.9 | 22.4 | 8.9 | 11 | 15 |

Source: ONS 2005

These figures often refer to ward level data, rather than information specific to school catchment areas or families with dependent children, so must be treated with caution. They do, however, give a flavour of each location.

*These figures refer to women aged 17-74 rather than mothers with dependent children, so must be treated with caution

**figures from local OFSTED, 2005

Country Wood, located in the green belt within the London Borough of Enfield, had higher than average proportion of households from social class one and two, and lower levels of social housing. However, unlike the other affluent locations, it had only average levels of car ownership, and relatively high proportions of minority ethnic group households, particularly Indian, Black African and Chinese families. Of the sample, it had the lowest rates of paid employment amongst women. Most children attending the school lived in the village. By contrast, suburban Common Green, located in the south west of the borough, was much more economically mixed. Although it had the highest unemployment rates amongst the five locations, the proportion of women working was the national average, suggesting higher levels of male unemployment. It also had low rates of car ownership and the highest proportion of households from a wide range of minority ethnic groups, including Black African, Black Caribbean, Indian, Turkish and Greek families. Most children lived within one mile of the school.

Questionnaire surveys distributed to all families in each school gathered information regarding how children currently travel to school and other places, asked who made decisions about how children travel, who escorted children, as well as broader socio-demographic information. Out of 1956 surveys distributed, 1006 were returned completed (a response rate of 51%). From this group, 23 families (chosen to reflect families from a range of socio-demographic backgrounds and types) also took part in a range of qualitative methods. As well as in-depth interviews with parents and children regarding children's travel, children used disposable cameras to photograph their journeys to school and diaries to record their travel (see Barker and Weller, 2003 for more discussion).

Much research on parenting (for example, see Windebank, 2001) encompasses mothers and often does not explore fathers' accounts. Although this research aimed to recruit mothers, fathers and children, fathers were often very reluctant, saying 'you need to talk to my wife, she knows about that kind of thing'. This reluctance of men to participate has been found by others researching domestic or intimate aspects of men's lives (Butera, 2006), since discussing such personal topics counters popular and hegemonic ideas about masculinities and men's behaviour. Ten percent (n=98) of the returned surveys were completed by fathers and only four fathers (out of 23 families) participated in an in-depth interview. Mothers were easier to recruit—21 mothers took part in in-depth interviews (which was complemented with interviews with 28 children).

Mapping gendered geographies of care and the escort of children

Feminist geographers have long observed that women have the primary responsibility for organising and undertaking care, for children and others (Laurie et al., 1999, McKie et al., 2002). In my research, in just under half of two parent families (46%), mothers had the sole responsibility for caring for children whilst they travelled. This was also reflected in the qualitative data, in which 5 out of 23 families, mothers were entirely responsible for organising and undertaking children's travel:

On the whole, it's me, dashing in and out, sorting it out. (Charlie and Pete's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

In the week the vast majority is her (mother). (Danel's Dad, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Yes... definitely (me)... And if it isn't (me) it's because I have set it up, if I'm doing another run (escort trip) or doing something, then I will have set something else up. (Helen's Mum, Country Wood, Enfield)

This reflects other research highlighting that mothers are often responsible for organising and undertaking escort trips as part of the broader range of "carescapes" (Bowlby et al., 1997, Law, 1999 and Dowling, 2000) and reflects other research suggesting caring is a gendered activity (Dyck et al., 2005). Trip chaining (combining the escorted trip to or from school with another journey) has been identified as a way of juggling commitments to maximise activities within a given time and space (Dowling, 2000, Collins and Kearns, 2001):

There is swimming on Wednesdays (3 mile trip), and tennis on Thursdays (2 mile trip), Saturdays 8 o'clock swimming for Pete (3 mile trip), then at 9 he goes to see his friend for an hour (1 mile trip), and then I have to get Charlie to swimming for 9.30 (3 mile trip), and then he finishes at 10 (3 mile trip). Then I pick Pete up at 10.50 (1 mile trip) and then there might be football (4 mile trip) after that. It's very stressful and very, very busy. (Charlie and Pete's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Following on from these examples, one mother described herself as a "Manic Mum" when referring to her everyday geographies of care. These examples show the scale of commitment, responsibility and complexity which this relatively new form of caring can involve for women. However, a complete lack of involvement of fathers was only found in some families—52% of two parent families suggested that fathers had some involvement in organising and escorting children. Indeed contemporary societies are characterised by a diversity of family forms and different gendered carescapes and divisions of labour (Bowlby et al., 1997, McDowell, 2004, Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2007). In some families fathers played a very significant role in this form of caring and, in one two parent family and one lone parent family, fathers had the sole or main responsibility for organising and escorting children. In some families (7 out of 23), the division of labour for escorting children was described as equal:

It's mostly me (who escorts daughter) but if she goes to birthday parties then it's her mother. (Lucy's Dad, County Wood, Enfield)

Sometimes... occasionally I go if he has an eye appointment or a hair dressers appointment, then I go, rather than him going home. I'll say I'll meet him at the school gate, and we'll go from there. But only if there's something happening. Nigel (Dad), he will go if it's his day off, he likes Daddy to come. (Ranj's Mum, Common Green Enfield)

In families where both parents undertook these forms of caring, the day-to-day organisation of escorting was complex and fluid:

Sometimes, Saturdays if we are both at home, Chris will take him, so I can get on with the housework and the washing. But quite often, Chris is at work on Saturdays, so I will do it. In the week, if there is driving to be done, early evening Chris will have to do it because I am not home from work. So it depends who is home... it's probably about 50/50. (Ritchie's Mum, Village Bottom Bucks)

This illustrates that although care can be characterised by routine and planning, everyday carescapes and individual carer's involvement within families are fluid, negotiated and change over time and context. The involvement of men perhaps reflects a shift in gendered carescapes as new roles of caring are being created for fathers within children's lives. This mirrors a broader shift in expectations regarding fatherhood from a role based upon absence to one of closeness, proximity to and engagement with children (Brandth and Kvande, 1998, Castelain-Meunier 2002). Indeed it is possible to consider whether this has led to a re-casting and re-configuration of caring relationships. However, we need to explore further the extent of participation in caring and how gendered carescapes varied across the different locations in the study. Despite their contributions, fathers rarely had overall responsibility for organising or undertaking the escort of children:

She (makes the decisions). I make suggestions sometimes but mainly it's my wife. (Lucy's Dad, County Wood, Enfield)

As mentioned earlier, amongst the 23 families taking part in the qualitative methods, only two fathers had the main responsibility for planning and undertaking the escort of children. Fathers' involvement was more usually limited, often to weekend responsibility for this particular aspect of care:

Yes. It is usually (me) ... my husband is around at the weekend, but it is me who drives them around most of the week. He does his bit on Saturday morning when we have to be in three directions at once, but it's generally me. (John's Mum, Rural Hill Bucks)

Yeah, (it's) usually Mum, but at weekends, my Dad. And he takes us to brownies. (Rachel, 7, Rural Hill, Bucks)

At weekends, families juggled a complex number of domestic and care tasks. Three particular points are of interest here. Firstly, fathers' involvement in escorting children (as for other aspects of caring) was limited to a stereotypical gendered division of labour:

Alan will help, but generally I do it (escorting children). It just works out that way. He's mowing the lawn or doing something else. (Rebecca and David's Mum, County Wood, Enfield)

Secondly, by implication, "helping out" reinforces that mothers retain responsibility for organising and undertaking the care of children whilst travelling—a finding also of research which has explored other aspects of the gendering of informal care (Milligan, 2003, Philo and Parr, 2003). Featherstone (2004) discusses how engagement and responsibility vis-a-vis domestic tasks are very different. Whilst many families may aspire to share gendered carescapes and the escort of children, few manage this in practice.

Thirdly, fathers' participation in escorting children often centred around "family outings", such as holidays, long journeys, or visits to adult friends and relatives:

If we go with Dad, then it's probably because we go to places that are very far away, or if we go on a very long walk. You enjoy going with someone else ... If we go on long journeys, it's always Daddy. (Rachel, 7, Rural Hill, Bucks)

But sometimes if we are going somewhere (special), Daddy sometimes drives. If we go on holiday, Mummy and Daddy take turns, but usually Daddy does it. He drives around a lot. (Sarah, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

These “special” trips were often seen as more complex or requiring more driving skills than everyday, routine journeys:

When we go on holiday, (or) go up to London, he drives then. He drives around much more, he’s more confident than I am. (Lydia and Katey’s Mum, Village Bottom, Bucks)

That fathers often have the responsibility for “special” outings reinforces that mothers as responsible for the more mundane, regular and routine journeys which Dowling (2000, p347) describes as the ‘temporal treadmill’. Everyday caring practices may be refracted as either “mundane, everyday and unskilled” or “specialist, complex and demanding” depending at least in part upon the gender of the participant. This shows that despite debate about changing gender identities and roles, existing gendered configurations of care have often been directly mapped on to these new spaces of caring.

Place, local cultures of parenting and gendered geographies of care

This section explores how these gendered patterns of caring for children vary across space and the complex number of interrelated reasons for these geographies of care. Economic factors, including parents’ engagement with, and the location of paid employment, influenced the production of local patterns of caring for children whilst travelling. Fathers’ paid employment limited their involvement in escorting children:

I don’t take them much, I have to leave early in the morning and come back late at night. I work on Saturdays too. (Daniel’s Dad, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Daddy’s at work so doesn’t do (the escorting). He’s never here during the week, he gets in too late. (Rebecca and David’s Mum, County Wood, Enfield)

Fathers’ involvement in paid employment produced particular gendered carescapes. Whilst fathers’ employment prevented their involvement, women’s participation in similar tasks, including full-time employment, rarely released them from their domestic responsibilities (Bowlby et al., 1997). Furthermore, in addition to their absence due to paid employment, fathers were often released from escort tasks when at home—fathers were allowed to be “tired of driving” or “tired from work” in a way that women were not, suggesting fathers may be able to pursue their own interests above those of the household (Pilcher, 2000). This questions the extent to which broader changes in women’s employment patterns have influenced men’s participation in domestic activities () and highlights the continuing influences of patriarchal power relations in structuring the experiences of women (WGSG, 1997, McKie et al., 2002)—a point not lost on the mothers taking part in my research:

Yes, I do it. My husband, he has his own business, he’s very busy, and he’s been spoilt. (Charlie and Pete’s Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

This particular quote provides insight into how care responsibilities and practices can be contested, and how care-giving processes can be sites of struggle (Williams, 2002). Men’s employment patterns and their non-availability to escort children impacted upon mothers’ lives in different ways in different places. Unlike fathers, many mothers combined escorting children to school and other places with their own employment:

Table 2 indicates that Common Green had the lowest proportion of parents (although as discussed earlier, we are in effect talking mostly about mothers here) combining the journey to school with other journeys (25%), whereas Country Wood had the highest (34%). These differences can be linked with spatial variations in the spatio-temporalities of women’s lives, including women’s participation in paid employment (Tivers, 1985), which impacts upon escorting patterns:

The reason they get dropped off in the morning is the simple fact that I have to then drive into (town), it’s a half way point. I can still take my children to school, and I have to be in work at quarter to nine. So that’s why they get dropped off. (Tom’s Mum, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Table 2. Spatial variations in trip chaining patterns

| | Per cent of parents going directly on to another activity having dropped child off at school |
|----------------|--|
| Rural Hill | 31 (n=52) |
| Village Bottom | 32 (n=88) |
| Suburban Royal | 32 (n=54) |
| Country Wood | 34 (n=31) |
| Common Green | 25 (n=76) |
| All locations | 30 (n=301) |
| | chi squared (χ^2)= 9.264, df=4, p<0.05 |

Although nationally employment participation rates for women have increased from 58.7% in 1985 to 70.2% in 2005 (ONS, 2005), patterns of women’s paid employment are not uniform (Jenkins, 2004). The census identifies distinct local patterns of women’s employment (see Table 1), indicating at the local level, a geography of women’s paid employment (Jenkins, 2004), with highest participation rates in Village Bottom and lowest in Country Wood. The research identified a number of complex interconnected factors influencing maternal participation in the labour market and everyday geographies of care. In relatively deprived Suburban Royal, both of the mothers taking part in the qualitative research undertook part-time employment specifically to increase family income, reminiscent of research in other deprived areas where mothers undertake part-time, low-paid employment (Tivers, 1985, Jenkins, 2004). However, local labour market conditions dictate what types of jobs are available (Bowlby et al., 1998). Whilst part-time service sector work was readily available at a distance on edge of town retail sites, there was none available in the local area near the school. Cars played a key role in enabling mothers to cover large distances in limited time frames, to maximise income whilst also undertaking escort and caring responsibilities (Pickup, 1985).

By contrast, in more affluent Rural Hill, mothers often undertook full-time, professional employment, producing different trip chaining schedules which often required collecting children from childcare at 6 pm. For example, one mother worked as a senior administrator in a hospital 15 miles from their home:

It is restricting being so far away (from work). I have to be at work (at the hospital) by 9, and that's a (15 mile) distance as well. And when I leave (work) at 3, and try to get there (school) by 3.15, but as they said, I can be a little bit late. Or I leave at 6 for the childminders. (Wendy's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

The examples from these two locations indicate how the production of everyday geographies of care for children were influenced by local, place-specific characteristics, such as local economies and the availability of relevant paid employment and childcare (Walby, 1990, Rose, 1993). As noted by Tivers (1985) and Holloway (1998), these experiences are differentiated by social class, and are constantly shifting, constructing new sets of relations. As McDowell (2004) notes, the closure of one employer or childcare facility can have many consequences, including altering women's travel patterns and care arrangements.

However, Jenkins (2004) identifies that women's participation in the labour market is not only determined by economic necessity or the availability of suitable paid work or childcare, but is also influenced by local ideological aspirations and expectations regarding gender identities. In the more affluent Buckinghamshire locations of Rural Hill and Village Bottom, some women undertook paid employment for the social and career benefits (rather than for economic incentives) which impacted upon escorting children:

You have to be really organised, combining it (escorting children) with work. I want to be a working Mum... I like to go out with my friends from work and do a class together. (Jane and Rachel's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Similarly, two of the four mothers from the affluent Country Wood taking part in the qualitative research did not undertake paid employment, stating that they preferred to stay at home (like many other mothers in the area) to look after their children. Hence, differing rates of labour market participation amongst women are informed in part by broader local cultures of parenting and expectations about mothers' employment (Dyck, 1990 and Holloway, 1998), although opportunities to enact this particular lifestyle were further differentiated by social class and the availability of, or need for, alternative sources of household income.

These local cultures of parenting and care generated local support networks, often available to carers, although contingent upon their spatial location (Milligan, 2003). These are important sources of practical support and information (Dyck, 1990 and Holloway, 1998) and mothers often co-ordinated car sharing through these networks as one response to the challenge to care for children whilst travelling to school (Dowling, 2000). Local moral landscapes of care create local moral orders, ideologies and practices of care (Parr and Philo, 2003). Local cultures of parenting produce, reproduce and transmit information about the negotiation of safety and danger, and expectations for care within the local area. Ross (2002) highlighted that these local cultures in rural Fife in Scotland promote the independent spatial mobility of children, in contrast to many other contexts in western, industrialised countries where local and more general spatialised fears are drawn upon to

restrict children. In turn, these social trends, communicated through local social networks, generate additional dependency and requirements for care:

There was something round about someone hanging around by the station, that's because of the girls going to the secondary school. (Ranj's Mum, Common Green, Enfield)

Once more these messages were spatialised, as some locations were seen as safer than others. Respondents in urban Suburban Royal and Common Green were more likely to report fears of stranger danger and the possibility of bullying from other children and young people:

(School is) across a main road. There's a pedestrian crossing and he has to cut through garages to get there. I'm not happy, because there are lots of older children there. It's not so much the traffic, it's the older children. (Daniel's Mum, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

The literature suggests that bullying and street violence, or at least the fear of these, is more visible within urban communities (Reay and Lucey, 2000). The proportion of parents identifying stranger danger was lower in rural places, in part reflecting the assumption, although often critiqued in the literature (see Matthews et al., 2000), that the countryside is less dangerous for children. However, in both Village Bottom and Country Wood, specific instances had begun to question this:

There was a girl who was attacked by someone. Changed my ideas about what was safe and what wasn't. Until then, I thought (the village) was a fairly safe community. It is safe in some respects, but that made me think about things. (Gill and Sarah's Mum, Village Bottom, Bucks)

This indicates both the general assumption that stranger danger is less of a threat in rural places, but also highlights how one incident can begin to challenge this view, reflecting that geographies of danger are not constant but subject to change.

Local cultures of parenting also had a powerful role in influencing gendered carescapes through promoting car use as part of local expectations regarding parenting and care. For example, Kearns et al. (2003) indicated how in Auckland, New Zealand, local cultures of parenting produce powerful expectations that escorting children, and indeed escorting children by car, is a necessary feature of parenting (Kearns et al., 2003). Similarly, in my research, in affluent places like Country Wood and Rural Hill, many families had purchased large, people carriers:

I would like a big seater car... but (my partner) doesn't see why we should have a bigger car to ferry other people's children around... but it doesn't work like that, because we all (mothers) take turns (driving the children). (Kylie and Stephen's Mum, Country Wood, Enfield)

As well as a practical response to escorting larger numbers of children as part of car sharing, buying 'a bigger car' can also be seen as a visible response to powerful local ideological expectations regarding motherhood in this particularly middle class part of Enfield, where large 4 × 4s and people carriers were commonplace. Material objects such as cars can be used as highly visible status symbols to create and maintain social difference (Maxwell, 2001). Unlike other private and invisibilised forms of care which go on in the home, these forms of care are highly visible and public, and generate powerful messages which shape normative everyday geographies of care in particular places. These messages include requirements for consumption (in this case, the purchase and running of large cars) as part of an ideology of "how to care".

The examples from the research also explore local variations in messages produced by local cultures of parenting and care. Reflecting the local socio-economic context, in the more deprived location of Suburban Royal, the relationship between cars and care was less focused on the model or size of car but rather its age. One child spoke of the status of being driven to school in a new car:

Yeah, (our car) it's a brand new car. (Tom, 8, Suburban Royal, Bucks, emphasis added)

Therefore, care and consumption are brought together in a very visible statement of caring for children by driving them to and from school and other places. However, some parents contested dominant local cultures of parenting and care which promoted car use. Just as others had assembled lifestyles organised around car use, some families had planned their everyday lives without cars or to limit car use:

I bought this house with the intention that they should walk to school, I think they should be able to walk there. (Kylie and Stephen's Mum, Country Wood, Enfield)

Since we moved here, a lot of things we used to do by car, we can now do on foot. (Gill and Sarah's Mum, Village Bottom, Bucks)

Whilst there are a number of ways in which local cultures of parenting influence everyday geographies of care, gender was significant in their operation. Fathers who were involved in escorting children discussed some of the problems which they face as men taking part in a caring role predominantly undertaken by women. Some fathers stated that they had wanted to participate in these local social networks, but, as men, had often been excluded or found it difficult to make such links, which were in general produced and maintained by women. For example, fathers discussed their experiences of isolation and exclusion outside the school gate:

In the morning, there are a few (Dads) ... Out of 90 kids in total, there is probably three or four Dads. (Vicky's Dad, Common Green, Enfield)

Obviously when I first went there (the school gate), I felt a bit isolated, you do stick out being one of a very small group (of Dad's). (Daniel's Dad, Rural Hill, Bucks)

This indicates how despite changes in ideas regarding masculinity and fatherhood, fathers as a social group can still be thought of as existing outside of everyday gendered carescapes (Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2007). Some fathers stated these social networks generated by mothers justified fathers' non-involvement in caring for children whilst travelling:

'My wife makes all the decisions, simply because all the other friends of my daughters have mothers who make decisions. It's easier for them to talk to my wife and vice versa.' (Lucy's Dad, Country Wood, Enfield)

More critically, this justification for non-involvement is a way of reproducing specific sets of gendered carescapes, which re-inscribe mothers as responsible for care. However, some fathers had managed to join these local social networks and discussed the benefits:

There is a social life amongst the parents (at the school gate), and there are a quite a few Dads there. And the school has quite a good extra curricular life as well, with fetes and one another.

Anybody who gets involved in doing those things, you get to know one another, that peer group. (Ranj's Dad, Common Green, Enfield)

But she's gotten to know other kids in the school, I've gotten to know their parents, and there isn't a problem now. We chat to everyone. But, yes, we (fathers) are a very small group. (Lucy's Dad, Country Wood, Enfield)

In one family, a mother described one impact of the father undertaking the escort of children—she now found herself more isolated from these local social networks:

Now I find that, you don't have that contact so much. You say, 'hi', chat to them, may be arrange to go for a coffee, now you don't do that as much. (Ranj's Mum, Common Green, Enfield)

In two families, fathers discussed how as well as linking into predominantly female social networks, they has created their own gendered social networks consisting of fathers:

She's invited to the same parties as her friends, so her friends' Dad can drive her there anyway. They'll drive them there and I will pick them up. (Vicky's Dad, Common Green, Enfield)

If they want or need to go out in the evening, once my husband is back, like brownies, we share lifts, and he will always take them there, he alternates with the husband of the other children who go there. So the wife and I go out and do a class together. (Rachel and Jane's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Although there is often hostility towards non-hegemonic or alternative forms of masculinity such as these (see Connell, 1995 and Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007), none of these fathers said they faced criticism or ridicule from their male friends or other fathers for undertaking the escort role, implying that local cultures of fathering did not perceive fathers' involvement in care as negative.

Fun with fathers? Escorting children and feminine and masculine concepts of care

In addition to assessing the extent of participation in carescapes, a number of geographers have called for an exploration of the gendered content and style of caring practices (Brandth and Kvande, 1998, Holloway, 1998, Dowling, 2000 and Mac an Ghaill and Haywood, 2007). Some aspects of carescapes were not gendered and were universally experienced by children who escorted by mothers or fathers. For example, enabling children to take part in activities which they enjoyed was a central aspect of the ways in which mothers and fathers cared for children whilst travelling:

Yeah, sometimes we have the radio on, and have a singalong. (Daniel, 9, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Sometimes you can have a sleep or play games... or we listen to music on our headphones. (Kathy, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

In the car, Stephen is attached to his game boy, but the girls are OK. They read and listen to the radio, and chat. (Kylie and Stephen's Mum, Country Wood, Enfield)

However, many aspects of the escort of children included distinctly gendered everyday caring practices. One key feature of mothers' escort was a focus on conversation:

If it's me, Mum, Vicky and Beck, we just talk. Mum and Vicky talk, me and Becca sit there... in the back. (Tom, 8, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Best thing about being with my Mum (in the car) is that I have someone to talk to. (Daniel, 9, Suburban Royal, Bucks)

Mothers and children talked about various events, including those related to school:

Kathy (9, Village Bottom, Bucks): We just talk about things, about school and stuff.

Lydia (9, Kathy's sister): We remind each other what we have to do in school...

Kathy: ...Yeah like homework and stuff.

We sometimes shoot times tables at them, or check out their spellings. (Charlie and Pete's Mum, Rural Hill, Bucks)

In some cases, escorting had an educational value and sometimes, in cars, children completed their homework, perhaps reminiscent of the way in which some workers use their cars as spaces to conduct business (Laurier, 2004). Therefore, mothers related to their children in particular gendered ways in these carescapes—mothers nurtured children (for example, to complete their homework) and also regularly saw the escort of children as a time to instil responsibility (for example, many mothers used the time to enable and remind children to undertake required chores as part of the daily temporal treadmill). Thus mothers often linked this caring space with other everyday caring practices and responsibilities. Interestingly, these aspects of caring were found only amongst mothers and not in father's escorting. The inclusion of these elements of nurturing and responsibility within everyday carescapes reflect broader everyday practices associated with stereotypical contemporary femininities.

Children identified that some aspects of being escorted by fathers was qualitatively different to being escorted by mothers:

(I like it as) Dad drives a lot faster than Mum (Wendy, 7, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Sometimes Mum finds it (driving) hard, because we talk to her on the way there, Dad finds it easier because he's more used to driving. Mum sometimes gets distracted... Mum can't concentrate as much as Dad can, because he does it so much, he can still talk and drive. (Kathy, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

Fathers' involvement in the escort of children can create a particular and distinct set of everyday caring practices from those children experience with mothers (as also found by Brandth and Kvande, 1998, in relation to looking after small children at home). Cars were central to some children's accounts of spending time with fathers, partly reflecting that men's status often gives them more access to cars than other members of the household. Many of the skills or qualities which children associate with fathers' driving are linked to expectations regarding men's behaviours and contemporary masculinities. For example, driving fast, which can be seen as both reflecting defiance but also control, is an expression of a particular aspect of contemporary masculinities (Miller, 2001).

As well as discussing the actual experience of being driven by fathers, children also commented upon features of the different cars that fathers drove:

Dad's car is a lot higher so it feels different... better. It makes you feel bigger, and you can see lots more things. (Kathy, 9, Village Bottom, Bucks)

Dad's car, he's got satellite navigation and stuff, so we can type in where to go. (Pete, 9, Rural Hill, Bucks)

Some of the accounts here echo the findings of other research, particularly a link between masculinity and technology (Garvey, 2001) and men's preferences for "side by side" activities, which represent particular masculine forms of intimacy which are characterised by "doing something together" (Brandth and Kvande, 1998 and Messner, 2001). That fathers do not simply replicate mothers' ways of caring or relating to their children whilst travelling perhaps indicates a distinct, masculine concept of caring for children (Brandth and Kvande, 1998). These men create a more domestic version of masculinity, which although care, also draws upon everyday practices (such as driving fast, and a reliance upon technology providing the focus for the journey) which are often identified as aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Miller, 2001 and Mac an Ghail and Haywood, 2007).

Conclusions

Care is an integral part of the relationship between parents and dependent children. However, this care relationship is not static over generations, and this paper contributes to the geographies of care literature through exploring new spaces of care (namely caring for primary school children on the journey to school) which have appeared over the course of a relatively short period of time. The paper has explored these new care roles, practices and relationships as they are played out in and through space (Parr and Philo, 2003), demonstrating that these new spaces of care produce substantial responsibilities which require commitment and skills to manage, negotiate and maintain. Although these are new spaces of care, it is clear that despite debate about changing gender identities and roles, existing gendered configurations of care have often been directly mapped on to these new spaces of care. Gender remains significant in the amount and type of care offered by individual parents, and mothers often remain primary carers.

These gendered geographies of care are clearly informed by different aspects of local cultures of parenting, which transmit expectations regarding labour market participation and good parenting, including the use of cars to care for and escort children, and values regarding (in)dependence, safety and danger. The evidence presented here shows how these local cultures are highly spatialised and specific to place. Local cultures of parenting can be both enabling (for example, in helping support mothers through powerful local social networks) but may also be restrictive and exclusionary (for example, in relation to the exclusion of fathers' involvement in local social networks).

The paper calls for further exploration of the shifting and nuanced relationship between care and dependency. Rather than the result of physical illness, new forms of dependency and care such as these are produced and shaped by social processes—in this example, it is a variety of influences including children's safety, local economies and local cultures of parenting (rather than children's physical condition or illness) which generate additional forms of dependency of children. These generate new forms of dependency which produce additional requirements for care and caring relationships.

The paper also tentatively explores the relationship between care and capital. It traces the links between the private, domestic sphere, local labour markets and patterns of consumption. Whilst care is often invisible, informal and carried out in the private space of the home, the examples here show the existence of highly visible expressions of care embedded within consumption patterns (for example, driving children in large cars). These are reproduced amongst local cultures of parenting and care, and produce highly powerful statements about the normative geographies of care in particular places. Having begun to explore this, it is clear there are many other ways in which the geographies of care can explore the relationships between care, consumption and capital.

Finally, the paper also begins to raise debates linking care and mobility. Mobility is an aspect of care work which has been rarely explored (see Power, 2008 as an exception). As societies become increasingly mobile, it is important for geographies of care to consider care in movement (for example, to explore how carers manage caring practices when mobile, and how these strategies differ from care at home), and indeed the barriers which may prevent carers and those receiving care from participating in everyday mobility in similar ways to other sections of the population.

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ⁱ Pseudonyms are used for the locations

ⁱⁱ Post 1945 legislation which protects the countryside around several urban areas of the UK by severely restricting development