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A collaborative autoethnography linking experience, scholarship and progressive politics

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research article

Gender and sustainability in our home: a collaborative autoethnography linking experience, scholarship and progressive politics

Sarah Parry, sarah.parry@ed.ac.uk
University of Edinburgh, UK

Joseph Murphy, joseph@joseph-murphy.org
Independent scholar, UK

Households are sites where a progressive politics of change towards sustainability can be nourished. Efforts to do so, however, must attend to gender dynamics. Our aim is to improve our understanding of how gender and sustainability intersect at the household level and engage with progressive politics in this context. To do so, we present a collaborative autoethnography focused on gender and sustainability in our household covering five years during which we experienced multiple lifecourse transitions. Building on this we answer two questions. First, how does the encounter between personal experiences and scholarship shape conceptual refinement? Second, how do personal experiences and scholarship combine to shape what we understand as progressive politics? This article not only advances the understanding of gender and sustainability in households and progressive politics in this context but also shows that collaborative autoethnography offers a valuable methodological toolkit for advancing research towards progressive politics.

Key words gender • households • sustainability • collaborative autoethnography • progressive politics • work • care

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Prologue

The summer of 2012 was a propitious one. At home, local builders had completed renovating our cottage in North East England, enabling us to spend much of our spare time creating a wildlife and vegetable garden or running on the local beach with our dog. Careers were also going well. Joseph had been appointed Chair in Environmental Studies and Sarah's promotion to Senior Lecturer was underway. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that this became the moment that we also decided

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to have a child: we knew it would be a radical change to our lives but it seemed like the right time for us.

Towards the end of 2012, in the context of Joseph's promotion, we bought a Victorian villa called Ashbank in a small village in South West Scotland and relocated.[1] Built from green-black whinstone and pale grey Dalbeattie granite, it had been the local police station until it was closed in the 1960s. After moving in it became clear that Ashbank was more delipidated than we anticipated and needed renovating. Nine months later our family also expanded with the birth of our daughter. In total, we spent five years refurbishing Ashbank, learning to be parents and becoming embedded in the local community, before relocating again in 2017.

After leaving Ashbank the experience of living there played a significant part in our decision as academics to explore how gender and sustainability intersect at the household level.[2,3] Thus, although we had collaborated professionally before, and our research interests had long since percolated our private lives, a new shared research focus emerged for us. This mapped onto our longstanding academic interests in specific ways: Sarah's in gender and Joseph's in sustainability. Yet this was not straightforward. Without wanting to downplay our ideological overlaps, which are substantial, individually we also tacked to as-yet-unreconciled politics. Sarah to the feminist normative goals of emancipation, as 'defined and measured as *women's* equality *with men*, to be achieved largely through higher economic status and equal wages' (Kaijser and Kronsell, 2014: 424, emphasis original) while Joseph is committed to advancing environmental politics through his research and personal life. For us, the encounter between these – indeed, sometimes collision – while living at Ashbank raised the question of what a 'doubly progressive' politics – of gender and sustainability – involved.

As we began to engage with existing research insights on gender and sustainability in households, our experience of living at Ashbank shaped our scholarship in profound ways (and vice versa). Articulated in sociological terms, we had experienced multiple lifecourse transitions (Burningham and Venn, 2020) where our established 'family practices' (Morgan, 2011) confronted a confluence of novelties at the intersection of gender and sustainability in our household: house, location, baby, job, community and technologies. Rather than hide this dynamic, we have decided to render it visible and productive. In this article, therefore, we use collaborative autoethnography to explore experiences at the intersection of gender and sustainability in our household and their role in our critical engagement with conceptual framings and normative agendas in this area. Posed as questions: first, how does the encounter between personal experiences and scholarship shape conceptual refinement? Second, how do personal experiences and scholarship combine to shape what we understand as progressive politics?

Why? Our aim is to extend the understanding of and engagement with progressive politics where gender and sustainability intersect at the household level. We are not, therefore, interested in telling a personal story (ours in this case) for its own sake. Nor are we trying to contribute to the general understanding of the relationship between the private and professional lives of academics. Such things have merit and are interesting but we are seeking a more subtle understanding of what progressive politics means at the intersection of gender and sustainability in households.

We begin by discussing our experiences at Ashbank between 2012 and 2017, focusing on those where gender and sustainability intersect most clearly. Following this, we introduce collaborative autoethnography as a method for connecting personal experiences with analytical concepts and theories. We then turn to the relationship

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between personal experience and scholarship to understand the productive dialogue between these for achieving conceptual refinement (as per question 1). This is organised into six themes: inflation of work, distribution of work, limits of work, care in our home, boundary of care and limits of care. Turning to our normative agenda, we then show how personal experiences and scholarship combine to shape what we understand as progressive politics where gender and sustainability intersect in households (as per question 2). Extending this, we raise questions about the limitations of our understanding of progressive politics and consider the role that collaborative autoethnography can play in informing both the process and content of future developments towards an inclusive progressive politics. We argue that collaborative autoethnography, which renders visible the dynamic between personal experiences and scholarship (both conceptual refinement and normative agendas), offers a valuable methodological toolkit for advancing research towards progressive politics and change.

Experience

Sarah

So much went wrong as soon as we moved into Ashbank! Leaking roof, burst pipes, broken heating, collapsed ceiling. It was relentless and the house wasn't meant to require so much of us. We had experienced renovations at our previous cottage and neither of us wanted another project. I was pregnant and you, Joseph, were dealing with the complexities of a new post; we both regretted buying the house. You've always disliked household renovations more than I, even necessary ones – the disruption, the material waste generated, the consumption required, the negotiations with tradespeople. But at Ashbank just sustaining the building was often more important than sustainability. Doing so often felt like a team effort. I quickly built up a list of contacts – tradespeople and organisations. The core included joiner, roofer, painter and builders, and beyond these were plumber, plasterer, heating engineers and glaziers. We discussed everything and agreed on the approach, but it was usually my job to organise the work.

One day sticks out in my mind. Adam and his team were on the roof dismantling and rebuilding one of the chimneys. It was a final attempt to stop the rain from coming in. I was desperate for it to work and even though we are paying them it felt like they were doing us a favour. It was cold and wet, so, in addition to the coffees, teas and biscuits I make for every worker, I made them cauliflower cheese soup. And when the scaffolding came down, we held our breath, and no more rain came in.

Often though, environment and sustainability were central to the work we had done. I organised for the solar water heating system to be reconditioned, for triple-glazed units to be installed in draughty openings, and for additional insulation to be installed in the roof. I also applied for the grants which covered the costs of installing and running a biomass boiler. There were cheaper and easier solutions, but we did the best that we could within the limitations of time and money.

When our daughter arrived work on the house continued but our lives had a new dimension. This was when I really embraced reuse. I think a Moses basket with bedding was my first eBay purchase or was it the baby intercom? Anyway, it became so common that we joked about our 'eBay baby'. My siblings had children when I was still young and so I was the one already familiar with the material things babies need or are useful. Family and friends were another source of used items. Declaring

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our interest in second-hand stuff not only provided us with things we needed but also gave us friendships in a new community.

Reuse wasn't always straightforward, though. I remember receiving a large bag of baby clothes, many of which were strongly gendered in terms of colour and design. We decided not to use these. But after that we became aware that the gift giver was looking to see us using what she had provided, and, because we did not, we never received anything else. We got some insight into the interaction when we gave our pram to someone else. That family put it to one side and bought a new one instead.

Dealing with a baby day to day meant a seemingly never-ending list of decisions and choices with implications for health, environment and sustainability. I bought and cooked organic vegetarian food where possible. I investigated alternatives to conventional household chemicals. Instead of disposable nappies, we opted for used, cloth ones. Cloth nappies, of course, added substantially to the normal amount of washing and drying. Overall, it was time consuming and sometimes exhausting but also satisfying.

With our daughter and dog in tow, I began to engage more with the local community. I became friends with a self-identified 'witch' – a spiritual ecofeminist, ex-teacher who had spent time protesting at Greenham Common – mainly because we shared a love of gardening. We often swapped plants. She encouraged me to treat her garden like a public space and we often wandered through, hoping that she would see us and pop out to say hello and have a chat.

One thing led to another and I became the chair of the local playgroup and vice-chair of the organisation formed to buy the village shop for the community. This is community and sustainability in action as far as I'm concerned. But in these roles, I also tried to raise new issues where I could. I still recall the playgroup committee meeting where I suggested we should stop using glitter because it is comprised of microplastics. At the time this was received as a miserable killjoy suggestion and was quietly ignored.

In fact, many local people were concerned about environmental issues and were finding various ways to live more sustainably. The process of applying for funding to create the community shop was interesting because it brought to the surface the visions and ideas people had for the future. Talking these through was frequently an education for me. Just before we left, I began mobilising others to engage in some friendly guerrilla gardening to enhance the village. I'm told that some of this took place the following summer.

Joseph

I did most of the heavy physical work on the house that we didn't pay others to do and enjoyed much of it, particularly renovating the garage and summer house. These jobs were outside in the summer and involved good exercise away from the desk and computer. And because both were dilapidated it didn't really matter what I did or what the outcome was. So, by using some left-over materials, and some (very) basic skills, I was able to reinstate two buildings. Both made positive contributions to our life.

Restoring the path around the house was different, although it was also an outside job. It would have been easy to dig out the gravel, throw it away, and replace it with more from a local quarry, but I wasn't comfortable with this. I decided to reuse what was there instead. But this meant lifting, riddling, washing and replacing it by hand.

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It took hours, days, weeks. Too long. But it did feel good at times; to me, every trug of gravel returned represented some part of the landscape that hadn't been quarried.

My worst jobs were inside and dirty. When our daughter was born her room had mould on the walls and ceiling and I felt under pressure to sort it out. We had learned in our previous house that paying others to do the demolition work was far messier, destructive and wasteful than if I did it. So, I pulled down the lath and plaster walls and ceiling and dismantled a brick chimney before it was boarded and plastered by someone else. After that, I pulled down the ceiling in the kitchen and then the walls and ceiling in the bathroom. It was horrible. But demolition was physically easier for me than you and I did recover some materials. We had plenty of kindling!

One of the first decisions we made was to install a pellet boiler and it was my job to keep it running. This meant regularly buying 30×10 kg bags of pellets from the local wood-fuel cooperative, transporting them home, pouring two to three bags into the hopper every night, and cleaning out the ash. I didn't want to waste the heat in the boiler room so I covered the ceiling with hooks from which I suspended our wet laundry every evening.

We also installed wood-burning stoves in the kitchen and dining room making three in total – one on each gable. We were driven partly by necessity; heating each gable was one way of dealing with the damp but it was also a way of heating the house in a more sustainable way. Ensuring a steady supply of logs and briquettes for the stoves was also my job. And I was usually the one who set the fires and cleaned the stoves.

Eventually, I decided to do something about the heat we were losing through the roof. You had already organised for us to have insulation installed through a government scheme but I later realised the job was incomplete. This meant spending a lot of time in the roof space. I shoved planks through the hatch to create a walkway, cut and placed insulated board in the comb ceilings, and then added additional layers of soft insulation. I remember thinking that if I didn't do it probably nobody else would – no matter who owned the house after us – and it would be a permanent source of unnecessary heat loss. I think it made a difference.

Although the house became more significant in our daily lives it was the location that attracted me; it hinted at a better and more sustainable way of life. I think I got closest to this when I bought a scavenging licence and spent weekends in the forest in April and May one year collecting most of the wood we needed for the following winter. The activity had so many positive aspects – using a nearby waste resource, sharing the activity with you and our daughter, getting exercise, saving money.

I also valued the forest as a setting for exploration. Over the years I crisscrossed it, riding my bike along the logging tracks until I'd built up a good knowledge of the region. This way I came to understand not only its physical geography but also aspects of the region's history and culture – S.R. Crockett's stories, Gaelic place names, Covenanter monuments. Over five years I mapped out the tracks and developed six or seven transects linking villages on opposite sides of the forest park.

I was fascinated by the region as somewhere to pursue sustainability. Community energy was a key issue including possibilities for micro-hydroelectric schemes and local use of biomass. Then there were the ecological projects and controversies such as the signal crayfish in Loch Ken, the reintroduction of red kites, and the possibility of reintroducing lynx. I was on the Board of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere Reserve and many of these issues came up in that context.

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Collaborative autoethnography

When developing our scholarship on gender and sustainability in households we actively drew on our experiences of living at Ashbank. Being transparent about this is particularly important when developing conceptual refinements in the service of extending the understanding of and engagement with progressive politics. Under the auspices of advancing 'public scholarship'[4] Murphy (2011: 370) has argued that to contribute to progressive change through public scholarship 'academics might need to reveal their background or biography because it is hard to imagine "progress" or "learning" through conversation [with publics] if one party refuses to reveal who they are'. How can academics do this?

Methods for connecting personal stories with relevant concepts and theories have been carefully advanced by researchers adopting analytical autoethnography (for example, Anderson, 2006; 2011; Ngunjiri et al, 2010; Chang, 2013; Lapadat, 2017).[5] This type of autoethnography uses personal stories to contribute to a 'refinement, elaboration, extension, and revision of theoretical understanding' (Anderson, 2006: 388). In this article, therefore, while personal experiences form the data, we link these to wider debates about gender and sustainability in households.

Our analytic autoethnography is collaborative because more than one researcher is present. This approach makes it possible to explore two or more sets of experiences that are intertwined, leading to insights which cannot be achieved otherwise (Lapadat, 2017). In our case, it is also significant that the topic includes the relationality of gender and family life in the context of sustainability in our home. Collaborative autoethnographic methods, therefore, help reveal relations.

What does this mean in practice? The practice of autoethnography is well understood and has received more attention recently. Indeed, feminist methodologies closely align with analytic autoethnography – the researcher is never separate from the world we seek to understand (for example, Haraway, 1988; Denshire, 2014). And while this method avoids some ethical quagmires, such as how to represent and 'speak for' others because the researcher is also the researched, it does not avoid this problem entirely (Lapadat, 2017). In our case, because our autoethnography was conducted retrospectively, after we had left Ashbank, we did not obtain consent from those we refer to in our experiences. Reflecting on this ethical dilemma we decided to carefully anonymise people and the location and to avoid speaking for others (see Lapadat, 2017). That we were not researching gender and sustainability in the households of others, or topics of trauma (Lapadat, 2017), was a key situational factor informing this decision.

But how did we achieve collaboration between ourselves? Having lived together for over a decade, and experienced various relationship mis/adventures along the way, we began by discussing the boundary of the study. We decided to focus on those aspects of day-to-day family life at Ashbank which shed the most light on the intersection of gender and sustainability, in the everyday of the household. This means, for example, that we do not focus on issues beyond day-to-day family life, such as our decision to have a child or career choices, although we touch on these at times. Within the day-to-day life boundary, our exploration involved 'critical probing sessions' (Ngunjiri et al, 2010) over a 12-month period. During these, we recalled events, challenged each other's memories and considered links to theory (Chang, 2013: 108).

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The critical probing sessions ran in parallel with convergent and divergent writing periods. The aim was to generate new insights beyond our own (Ngunjiri et al, 2010), particularly theoretical ones (Anderson, 2006). A key aspect of this process was identifying six themes, operating across the period 2012–20, which bridge between experience and scholarship: inflation of work, distribution of work, limits of work, care in our home, boundary of care and limits of care. We identified these in discussion with each other and they structure our discussion of the conceptual aspects of our work later in the article. To present the whole work, section by section, we considered voice, tense and authorship. Of course, although there are single-authored sections, the whole is a co-authored piece of work. Ultimately, our aim is to analyse the relationship between experience and scholarship, in our case to gain a more subtle understanding of what progressive politics means in the area of gender and sustainability in households.

Moving between experience and conceptual refinement

Inflation of work

As the vignettes illustrate, our time at Ashbank involved a general inflation of household tasks. Most of these (perhaps all) had gender and sustainability aspects that intersected. This was the case for Sarah in relation to 'eBay baby', for example, and Joseph in relation to home heating. It is undoubtedly the case that this inflation influenced our scholarship in this field from the outset. Most obviously it shaped Sarah's early embrace of 'work' as a key concept in gender and household research and our subsequent search for literature on work, gender and sustainability in households (for example, Sandilands, 1993; Farbotko, 2018; Mellor, 2019).

Sarah identified a small group of scholars who had already critiqued the feminisation of household sustainability tasks from the work standpoint (for example, Organo et al, 2013; Dzialo, 2017; Kennedy and Kmec, 2018). One of the key things this literature emphasises is that household sustainability requires additional resources such as time, energy and emotions. In this context, when we looked back, it struck us how naive we were. To a large extent, we had assumed, incorrectly, that new and more sustainable activities could and should be integrated into our lives relatively easily. But in a context characterised by multiple lifecourse transitions one consequence was that we failed to reflect on tasks in terms of gender (how they (re)produced a division of labour) or sustainability (their merit compared with other possible tasks); we simply lacked the 'head space' (Burningham and Venn, 2020).

Distribution of work

Although we failed to reflect on the distribution of tasks at the time, when we looked back the experience of living at Ashbank left us acutely aware of it as an issue. In most cases sustainability extended an existing gendered division of labour: over the years Sarah has always enjoyed doing most of the cooking and sourcing items for the home, while Joseph had established an enjoyment for outdoor-based projects. But these had been established and enjoyed in a period when they didn't compete with other demands and there was time for some fluidity concerning these roles. Now, in

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our time-strapped context of multiple transitions, our roles became more distinct, yet this helped us get by.

When we engaged with literature on work and sustainability we found it resonated with our experiences in many ways but also largely focused on women (see, for example Sandilands, 1993; Dzialo, 2017; Kennedy and Kmec 2017; Farbotko, 2018; Mellor 2019). Reflecting on his inflation of work in the home, Joseph was therefore not only concerned about the limited discussion about men, masculinity and sustainability in homes but also about the bias of reading what women do at home as work and what men do as not-work or something else (for example, Moisio et al, 2013). A priori assumptions about men's activities in homes as not-work creates the context through which research retains a focus on women – a focus we seek to break away from.

While existing feminist scholarship emphasises how sustainability reproduces and extends existing patterns of work (for men and women) we became interested in change. Our experiences indicated that some new sustainability tasks can be part of redistributing work towards men. The personal example we discussed several times after leaving Ashbank was how the task of drying laundry passed from Sarah to Joseph. Various pieces of existing research helped us to understand this. For example, reading work on household tasks and gendered spaces in homes (Offenberger and Nentwich, 2009), it became apparent that the relocation of laundry from kitchen to boiler room was significant because of the gender coding of household spaces. Also, research on gender and technical know-how shone a light on how the task was associated with efficiency and ventilation for Joseph.

Limits of work

Although it is the case that the general inflation of household tasks and related burdens predisposed us to interpret these as 'work', our experience of living at Ashbank also raised the problem of when a task is work and/or something else. Sticking with the concept but looking for its limitations led us to identify a bias in existing scholarship: the tendency for researchers to define what women do at home as work and what men do as leisure (Wajcman, 2015: 118). We felt there was a need to develop an inclusive accounting system of *all* activities that go on in the home, regardless of who does them. Drawing on our experiences, we can advance this point. In retrospect, for us, sustainability at Ashbank complicates the women-work/men-leisure dichotomy because many sustainability tasks in households are conventionally gendered leisure pursuits. Take Sarah's second-hand shopping for babywear and Joseph's renovation tasks. We found that it was easy to misrecognise some tasks as leisure and therefore optional. Without intending to, this misrecognition generated more work than we had time for. Significantly, neither of us was noticing the other's difficulties; instead, as leisure, they were positioned as desirable rather than essential acts of 'doing family' (Morgan, 2011). Reflections such as these led us to seek out research that avoided or countered this bias (for example, Moisio et al, 2013; Hultman and Pulé, 2018). We concluded that in our case the problematic boundary between work and leisure to some extent resulted from a conceptual misstep or error.

Ultimately, however, thinking about Ashbank in the context of research on gender, work and sustainability in households presented a greater challenge. Joseph raised worries that the concept of work misrepresented family life or erased something about

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it that was important and in doing so helped capitalism to penetrate the domestic sphere. For example, Sarah sourcing triple-glazed windows or Joseph scavenging firewood. Is this work or not? We did not feel that the concept itself – including the work/leisure dichotomy – adequately captured our experience or the character of many of the household tasks we often used as examples for our own purposes to explore the literature. At least for us, work did not always make sense in relation to such things as parenting, home maintenance and gardening. This disconnect encouraged us to engage with comprehensive critiques of the work perspective and to seek alternatives (for example, Himmelweit, 1995; hooks, [1984] 2015) and through these to embrace 'care' as an alternative to 'work'.

Care in our home

As the vignettes illustrate, our day-to-day family life at Ashbank came to be defined by looking after our daughter and renovating the building. Although these are quite different, we approached them in the same way. Within the bounds of what was possible, and while acknowledging numerous difficulties, the desire was always to nurture as best we could. It was in the context of this experience that we grew dissatisfied with the concept of work, then unpicked the 'care work' neologism, and, with the help of critiques of the work perspective,[6] arrived at care as an alternative way of understanding gender and sustainability in households (for example, Lynch, 2007; Tronto, 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Hultman and Pulé, 2018).

It is also here that scholarship has had the most impact on our understanding of experience. Care emphasises not just relationality but interdependence and caring relations as a state of becoming (Martens, 2016), something that, in theory, we can all do. From this standpoint we looked back and understood our experiences rather differently. The intersection of gender and sustainability in our household exists in things like Sarah's careful feeding of tradespeople and Joseph's equally careful efforts to renovate our daughter's bedroom without wasting materials. Thus, for us, the concept of care rendered visible some relations which were hidden, and revalidated them. We found this more useful than focusing on and cataloguing who did what.

One of the most intriguing (for us) areas where this happened was in relation to material infrastructures. It became clear that some material infrastructures help build interdependence more than others. Working with this insight we turned to feminist science and technology studies scholarship to discern allied insights for gender and sustainability in households (for example, Pols and Moser, 2009; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). We realised that engagement with material infrastructures can disrupt traditional gendered caring relations. For instance, Joseph's slow and care-full approach to riddling our gravel paths invited Sarah to complete this task with our daughter because matters of physical strength, speed or technical know-how were erased. Such experiences guided us towards adding material infrastructures to our understanding of caring relations, when thinking beyond the human in households (Gibson-Graham, 2011).

Boundary of care

Beyond looking after our daughter and renovating Ashbank, we both connected with what lay beyond our property. As the vignettes illustrate, we did this in different ways, Sarah focusing on community and Joseph more on place and ecology. At the

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time we understood both orientations to be aspects of sustainability. Therefore, and perhaps without realising it, when we turned to the topic of gender, sustainability and households, we were looking for a perspective which was expansive enough to accommodate these aspects of family life. Here again, the care perspective made sense to us because the relationality it emphasises extends far beyond the garden fence or wall.

In this area, as in others, scholarship has helped us to understand more about experience in retrospect. For example, care led us away from thinking about sustainability in households as something characterised by individualised actions to something built on collective ones (Dombroski, 2016) – particularly to examples of building collectivities, such as Sarah's role in community enterprises and Joseph's in leading discussions on the reintroduction of lynx at the Biosphere meetings. Perhaps the most emblematic example was family days spent collecting firewood that simultaneously fostered family life as connectedness with nature, and created immersive learning about the interrelatedness of our home-heating and the natural world for our daughter (D'Amore, 2016; Martens, 2016). As a local manifestation of a complex web of people, technologies and environment this example highlights the multidimensional yet diffuse aspects of care/caring. It added to the 'we' of communities imbricated in sustainability, towards a more-than-human politics of family practices (Gibson-Graham, 2011; Morgan, 2011; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

Limits of care

Although our time at Ashbank was enjoyable it was also difficult. This meant we were sensitive to the limits of care from the outset. Indeed, we had a wealth of immediate tough experiences to draw on when we explored what a care perspective illuminates. These led us to emphasise two key points in our work. First, because care can be (and often is) burdensome, it still matters who does the caring. Thus, the work perspective focus on the gender distribution of tasks remains important. Second, significant and sometimes insurmountable problems arise when care in the home is not supported by society to free up the resources required to expand our caring relations – economically, institutionally and culturally (MacGregor, 2010; Gibson-Graham, 2011; Tronto, 2013). This is perhaps not surprising, given that care is social.

The literature on care, of course, is not naive, and it also alerted us to issues in our family life which we did not see clearly at the time. One of these is the ever-present danger of the neoliberalisation of care (Tronto, 2013), where it becomes something associated with private choices, commercial relations and individualised responsibility. This caused us to look back and wonder how our care had been located in an increasingly global political and economic context. For example, where had we put the boundary between buying care in and doing care ourselves? Why there and not elsewhere? These questions cast a range of decisions regarding such things as childcare, working with tradespeople and buying food in a new light. It not only illuminated the bald choices we faced between buying in care or doing more care ourselves, but also the tensions between the immediacy of some caring taking precedence over longer-term caring relations that needed to be nurtured. This was most starkly experienced in the way in which our gendered sustainability implicated decisions beyond the home, particularly career choices. Indeed, the care perspective helped us understand that, without intending to, we had created a context where our careers were placed in conflict

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with family practices that were oriented (overburdened, even) by gendered sustainability at home.

Towards a progressive politics: from our specific case to wider use

Thus far we have shown how collaborative autoethnography renders visible the dynamic between personal experience and scholarship to show the productive dialogue between these for achieving conceptual refinement. It is possible to describe the relationship between experience and scholarship in two directions, experience to scholarship and vice versa, but, as our discussion so far illustrates, doing so would risk misrepresenting reality in the interests of clarity. While it is true to say that living at Ashbank played a key role in directing us towards gender and sustainability in households as a new (for us) area of research, beyond that we find it is hard to say with any certainty when scholarship or experience came first. Thinking with the concepts of work and care, we now move on to address how personal experiences and scholarship combined to shape what we understand as progressive politics where gender and sustainability intersect in households.

Our normative politics

Our conversations about the concepts of work and care routinely bled into conversations about the different normative politics implied with each of these perspectives. And as with conceptual refinement, our efforts to reach for a doubly progressive politics emerged through a dialogue between experience and scholarship.

With regard to the work perspective, we concluded that household tasks undertaken to improve sustainability which also contribute to 'equality of work' can be understood as 'doubly progressive'. We arrived at three ways in which this can be achieved: (1) by financial compensation for sustainability tasks, (2) by equitably reassigning sustainability tasks, and (3) by enhancing the societal value ascribed to sustainability tasks – what we call 'restatusing' (Murphy and Parry, 2021). Some of these arguments are more strongly informed by the research literature and others by experience. The idea of compensation, for example, has little or no link to our household but came directly from the 'wages for housework' debate (for example, Federici, 2012). In contrast, the laundry example discussed earlier was the one around which we explored the reassignment of tasks. And more generally we later reflected on the status of sustainability tasks in our home compared with the status of tasks outside the home such as paid work.

Regarding the relative merits of compensation, reassigning and restatusing, we emphasised restatusing as an important gateway towards degendering sustainability in homes. Here, again, experience played a role. For two people with secure employment and good salaries, compensation for sustainability tasks at home was not a priority. Similarly, neither of us felt that household work per se was unfairly distributed – we were both busy (too busy!) most of the time. Instead, we were familiar with the low status in society which household tasks are afforded relative to those outside the home (for example, Cox, 2013; Tronto, 2013), regardless of whether they are feminised or masculinised – including how such notions crept into our family life. Yet our familiarity with diverse family formations and social locations – including through personal connections and the research insight of others – alerted us to the

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need to incorporate these different elements of a normative work-based perspective for a doubly progressive politics.

When we shifted our attention to the doubly progressive politics of care we identified a normative starting point in the need for more and better care (Lynch, 2007; Tronto, 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017). We rearticulated this as 'expansion of care' with three possibilities: 'make relations which already exist more caring by changing their content, thicken existing caring relations by adding dimensions and extend caring relations to who/what is currently neglected' (Murphy and Parry, 2021: 1112). Arriving at these points proved difficult. We found less concrete direction on the political and normative goals of care in the literature and so we drew more strongly on our experiences. At the broadest level, expanding care made sense to us in a context where the presence (and absence) of care became apparent, particularly through our need to engage in more and better care for a new child. Moreover, we found care linked and rendered visible seemingly unconnected things like community ownership of the local shop, swapping baby clothes, gathering firewood in the forest, promoting the reintroduction of species and providing warming soup for tradespeople.

Overall, we found care an immersive worldview that eschews instrumental relations and challenged many of our conventional(ised) practices and ways of thinking. Further, elevating both the visibility and status of an ontology that locates us all in a web of relations resonated with our experiences at Ashbank. Reflecting on the raft of caring relations we were engaged in – for better or for worse – alerted us to the resources of time, money and emotions required to expand care. This helped us avoid a romantic view of care where gender and sustainability intersect in households (Martin et al, 2015). On the one hand, we were able to identify the effects in our lives of caring relations that were rooted in pernicious meanings and conflict regarding gender and care, including an absence of socio-institutional conditions supporting a family life that enables caring relations to flourish (Jamieson, 2017). On the other hand, thinking with care offered us a transformative worldview with which we might politicise and recraft gender and sustainability in households.

As with the literature, our scholarship on a doubly progressive politics remains in its infancy. In particular, there remain lingering yet substantial questions concerning how specific our framework of work and care, and its details, are to us. We have at least three concerns in this area. First, in relation to work and care, would others emphasise other normative goals? For instance, in relation to work would compensation be more significant for those on lower or precarious incomes? If so, this opens up some important questions about mechanisms through which compensation for sustainability in households should be achieved. Second, would others emphasise work and care relative to each other differently? While we found care offers the more radical set of tools in relation to our experiences perhaps others would conclude otherwise. Third, and perhaps most importantly, did we fail to find dimensions beyond work and care, at least in part because of who we are and how that shaped our reading of the literature? For instance, have we adequately addressed the political economic context of work and care to resist commodified and individualised agendas of gender and sustainability in households?

Collaborative autoethnography as a methodological toolkit

The open-endedness of these questions points to the possibilities for researchers to harness collaborative autoethnography as part of research methodologies, especially

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for informing the process and content of an inclusive progressive politics for gender and sustainability in households. We see this has having two steps.

The first step, as this article evidences, is for researchers who are skilled in qualitative data collection and analysis to engage in single or collaborative autoethnography to *render visible* the productive dialogue between personal experience and scholarship (Anderson, 2006). This is particularly important when developing conceptual refinements with the aim of extending understanding of and engagement with progressive politics. Social scientists are already generating qualitative studies researching the lives of others to achieve conceptual refinement (for example, Burningham and Venn, 2020, on lifecourse transitions). But analysing personal experiences provides a different and potentially inclusive starting point for research projects. The autoethnographic text holds opportunities to democratise research because it transparently presents the research process to those inside *and* outside of academia – in our case, revealing how the dialogue between experience and scholarship has shaped our understanding of a doubly progressive politics. Returning to our earlier point, revealing our backgrounds helps initiate conversations with others in the doing of public scholarship (Murphy, 2011).

The second step involves extending this democratisation through further collaborative autoethnographies. Working between personal experience and scholarship creates research opportunities involving collaboration and co-creation of knowledge with others, including beyond academic circles.[7] In this vein, collaborative autoethnographic research offers a valuable methodological toolkit for doing research towards progressive social change (Lapadat, 2017).

In practical terms, bringing these two steps together, the content of a research article, such as this one, can be folded into qualitative research with others, initiating conversations about how gender and sustainability intersect in households. Prosaically, the researcher can ask how do these experiences compare with yours, how do the work and care framework help/hinder you in understanding what goes on in our or your household(s), and what are the elements of a doubly progressive politics for you? Such collaboration can then be deepened by facilitating autoethnographic research and writing by/with others, opening up and extending those conversations.

Combined, these steps form a process through which we can develop a non-universal(ising) doubly progressive politics – one that is developed through understanding the intersection of gender and sustainability as experienced in diverse family formations and socioeconomic contexts. How these interact with other categories of difference, including class and race, requires particular attention. Put simply our arguments about work and care need stress testing to attend to diversity, and our collaborative autoethnography – this article – has taken us one step in that direction. In practical terms, if we substitute 'scholarship' with the more general notion of 'understanding' of gender and sustainability as work and care in households, then numerous possibilities emerge to pursue the agenda of a doubly progressive (gender and sustainability) politics through praxis and action research.

Epilogue

At the time of writing the linkages between gender and sustainability in our home continue to unfold. These extend, of course, well beyond day-to-day family life and include issues about income and employment, where and how to live, and how to

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parent. This illustrates that the boundary we have drawn around family life throughout much of this article is false and we are aware of the danger of sustainability focusing on everyday household tasks while ignoring decisions with longer-term implications and structural issues. Reconciling the normative politics of gender and sustainability in our household remains our work-in-progress – in scholarship and family life.

Notes

[1] We have changed the name of the house.

[2] We purposefully formulate this as 'gender and sustainability in households', rather than 'household sustainability'. This is to foreground that 'gender' and 'sustainability' are two, dynamic elements that come together in households. We do not presuppose something called 'household sustainability' exists prior to the intersections of gender and sustainability in particular contexts.

[3] As we explain at the beginning of Murphy and Parry (2021), professional experiences also shaped this decision.

[4] More often linked closely to disciplines such as 'public sociology' (Burawoy, 2005) and 'public geography' (Murphy, 2011).

[5] Although not through the prism of autoethnography, one of the authors has written in this way previously (Murphy, 2009; 2011).

[6] For example Himmelweit's (1995: 2) caution that the work perspective fails to 'give value to the personal and relation aspects of much domestic activity'.

[7] In this sense, our autoethnography offers the opportunity to move between critical and public social science (Burawoy, 2005).

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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