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Holding back and hidden family displays: Reflections on aunthood as a morally charged category

Abstract

This paper explores aunthood as a morally charged category. By conducting a thematic analysis, we analyse advice-seeking posts published in *Dear Savvy Auntie*, an American online advice forum for aunts. Drawing on Finch and Mason (1993), Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2000) and May (2008), we examine the moral tales of aunthood and particularly why some aunts might feel that they cannot openly articulate their sense of responsibility within the family context, and the consequences of this. This leads us to assert that one way of ‘doing’ moral aunthood can be a form of non-doing as theorised by Scott (2018,) and allows us to examine how aunthood is done and displayed (Finch, 2007; Morgan, 1996; 2011; Nelson, 2006) in ways which are often hidden and unacknowledged. We suggest that caution, avoidance and self-restraint may be routine aspects of displaying aunthood and of working out family responsibilities and family obligations.

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Introduction

This paper presents a new conceptual lens from which aunthood and everyday moralities can be deciphered. As opposed to the rich literature on parental responsibilities, particularly maternal responsibilities (e.g. Donath, 2017; Douglas and Michaels, 2004; Hays, 1998; May, 2008; Oakley, 1974; Orgad, 2019; Rich, 1986), aunthood is rarely discussed in scholarly debates concerning the moral dimensions of family life. The aim of the present paper is to help fill this gap by examining how aunts without children experience and interpret the moral dilemmas they face in their relationships with their nieces and nephews. In doing so, we contribute to the theorisation of the moral dimensions of aunthood and to further conceptualisation and increased understanding of familial dynamics and everyday moralities.

The present paper is part of a broader study on aunthood which aims to provide the field with new conceptual tools to understand the experiences of aunts. In our previous paper, we argued that in some very particular cases the aunt is an involved observer (May and Lahad, 2019) who can be privy to 'private' information pertaining to the lives of parents and children while at the same time, being careful not to breach the boundaries of the parent-child unit by 'interfering'. The question that we left unanswered, and that forms the focus of the present paper, concerns the moral dimensions of 'doing' and displaying family from the perspective aunts. Our paper thus sits within the 'family practices' tradition, the focus of which is on the 'doing' of everyday family life (Morgan, 1996, 2011; Nelson, 2006). Our paper also builds on work that has examined aspects of family life that are less obvious, such as 'holding back' (Brownlie, 2014) or 'not interfering' (May et.al 2012).

Our aim is to contribute to theorising aunthood, a category which is infrequently conceptualised in sociological scholarship. Our argument is that theorising aunthood allows sociologists to study unrecognised and invisible interfamilial dynamics. We develop this line of inquiry by analysing moral dilemmas recounted by American aunts, without children, posting on the *Dear Savvy Auntie* online forum. Inspired by the work of Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2003), we view the posts as expressions of everyday moralities, ranging from mundane matters such as clothing and child development to crises involving illness or parental negligence. The moral imperative of putting children's interests first (May, 2008; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003; Smart and Neale, 1999) plays a central role in how the aunts in our study construct themselves as gendered moral subjects and produce everyday moralities. By expressing concern for the well-being of their nieces and nephews and at times criticising the parenting practices of their siblings (-in-law), the aunts are, we propose, 'doing' *moral aunthood*.

We are particularly interested in understanding how these aunts work out their family responsibilities (Finch and Mason, 1993) while at the same time being aware of and negotiating familial boundaries. We argue that the unique familial position of the aunts in our study (as female kin and as aunts who do not have children of their own) entails distinctive challenges, as well as particular possibilities and restrictions in

terms of resolving these dilemmas. While our paper does pave the way to asking questions about the differences between aunts and uncles, these are beyond the scope of our analysis, which is concerned with the gendered elements of doing moral aunthood.

The texts reveal that because of familial boundaries and because aunts can lack a mandate to act, one response to moral dilemmas of aunthood is to *not* act. We utilise Scott's work (2018) on non-doing as a form of social action to analyse how not acting, with all its ambiguities, is presented by the aunts as a family practice that helps constitute family. This then raises the issue of how such moral aunthood that is at least partly built on non-doing can be displayed and to whom (Finch, 2007). We argue that in some cases, moral aunthood can only be displayed in ways which are *hidden* and *unacknowledged*, thus adding to knowledge of the possible nature of everyday family moralities and doing families. Overall, our work aims to design a new conceptual framework which can be used to understand the position of various extended family members such as grandparents, siblings and blended family members.

The paper is structured as follows. We begin by exploring the theoretical underpinnings of our argument, consisting of the work on aunts, the moral dimensions of family life, particularly how family responsibilities are negotiated and displayed. We then move on to describe the online texts and our method of analysis of these. We begin by exploring how aunts' uncertain position in familial hierarchies, including the fact that in some situations, they lack the mandate to act in the best interests of their nieces and nephews. While these displays of moral aunthood may remain invisible within their families, the *Dear Savvy Auntie* site offers them a forum where they can seek recognition, thus ensuring the success of a moral display. We conclude our paper by considering non-doing as an analytical category that allows us to shed light on subtle familial moralities and practices that are based on silences, avoidances and hesitations.

Non-doing as a form of 'doing' aunthood

In this paper we explore aunts' accounts of moral dilemmas so as to gain an understanding of ways in which aunts do moral aunthood. Scholars have long acknowledged the need for further explorations on aunts and uncles, termed so eloquently by Milardo (2010) as 'the forgotten kin'. This paper aims to fill what we see as a significant scholarly lacuna in the sociology of everyday family life.

Studies on aunts have offered significant insights into the different roles and positions aunts take in familial life (Davis-Sowers 2012; Ellingson and Sotirin, 2006; 2010; Hayden, 2011; Milardo, 2005, 2010; Sotirin and Ellington 2006, 2007, 2013). For example, in her study on African American aunts who have taken custody of their nieces and nephews, Davis-Sowers (2012) observes that aunts' role enactment depends on many factors, including the relationship between siblings, geographical proximity, marital status, and social class. These diverse factors affect aunts' perceptions of their caregiving responsibilities as well as their abilities to do and perform aunthood. Another important consideration concerns racialised differences in aunts' kin responsibilities. As Davis-Sowers (2012) points out, a significant motivation for African American aunts to take care of their nieces and nephews can be the fulfillment of what they understand to be their family obligations. These are rooted in the tradition of other mothering (Collins, 2002) in which black women care for each other's children. In other words, notions of what constitutes moral aunthood are dependent on cultural context.

Our analysis is particularly concerned with the gendered dimensions of doing moral aunthood. As studies on aunthood (Davies-Sowers 2012, Ellingson and Sotirin, 2010; Hayden, 2011; Sotirin and Ellingson, 2006, 2007, 2013) maintain, gender is a vital component in the construction of aunthood. Consequently, doing aunthood can involve not only doing family (Morgan, 1996, 2011; Nelson, 2006) but also doing gender (West and Zimmerman, 1987). For example, feminist communication scholars point out that although popular representations of aunts at times challenge the association of women with motherhood, they also promote a caring, nurturing and selfless subject position which resonates with patriarchal ideologies of motherhood and the nuclear family (Ellingson and Sotirin, 2010; Hayden, 2011; Sotirin and

Ellingson, 2006, 2007, 2013). The gendered dimensions of aunthood are particularly compelling when aunts without children are concerned. Here we concur with and extend Hayden's (2011) observation that through the *Savvy Auntie* website, women without children are interpellated as a group defined through their love of children. As Hayden clarifies, the resultant constructions of aunthood are entrenched in the conflation of the ideologies of intensive mothering, new momism and consumerism. While Hayden analysed the messages promoted by Melanie Notkin, the founder of the *Savvy Auntie* website, and of the experts writing for the site, here we address the texts written by aunts who are seeking advice.

By analysing accounts from the *Dear Savvy Auntie* forum, we wish to extend the existing literature on aunthood by building on Finch and Mason's (1993) work on negotiating family responsibilities. In particular, we have drawn inspiration from their understanding of the complex nature of morality, which is not absolute but instead something that is worked out in relationships with others. Finch and Mason highlight that rarely does there exist a 'set of preordained social rules' concerning 'the right thing to do', which is why negotiation plays such an important role as family members work out what to do in a particular situation (1993: 59). At the same time, they point out that such negotiations are 'never entirely open-ended' and can at times 'be quite tightly constrained'. Adopting Finch and Mason's approach allows us to attend to the uncertainties and hesitations that aunts experience as they try to make sense of and negotiate their moral dilemmas, as well as the rather narrow set of options they perceive they have for acting in any given situation.

Our analysis of how the aunts reflect upon these everyday moralities utilises Finch's (2007) concept of 'family display'. We do so in response to Colette and Child's (2009) call to further employ the performative approach in studying everyday familial life. Finch argued that 'families need to be "displayed" as well as "done" because their contours and character are not obvious' (2007: 73). Such displays are 'actions which confirm that I regard these people as part of "my family"' (p. 66). Displaying family is 'not simply an optional extra' but is instead 'fundamental to successfully constituting "my family relationships"' because 'relationships do not exist as *family* relationships unless they can be displayed successfully' (p. 79, emphasis in original). In order to be successful, Finch proposes, a family display must be 'understood and

accepted as such by others’, which in turn requires that it must ‘be linked in a sufficiently clear way with the “wider systems of meaning”’ if it is to be ‘effective’ (pp. 67, 79).

Our findings indicate that these wider systems of meaning can situate aunts as family members who, as opposed to parents, do not automatically have a mandate to act in relation to children’s well-being. We argue that, for some aunts, one way of ‘demonstrating that relationships ... are effective in a family-like way’ (Finch, 2007: 70) is to not ‘interfere’, that is, to not take visible action. ‘Not interfering’ has been found to be a characteristic feature of grandparenting, which, as is also the case in our data, can open up moral dilemmas concerning whether children’s well-being is being adequately protected (May et.al, 2012). The ‘silent co-presence’ adopted by aunts and grandparents who refrain from ‘interfering’ is a ‘background practice of caring’, as theorised by Brownlie (2014: 138). She points to the significance of ‘holding back’, of not saying or asking, as practices of caring that are part of how people negotiate their relationships. By shedding light on these *hidden* forms of doing family, we extend existing work on family displays, which has tended to focus on clear and visible displays. These include the display work that lesbian couples and their families of origin engage in at the point when the lesbian couple have children (Almack, 2008), or how surnaming decisions among lesbian and heterosexual parents constitute family displays (Dempsey and Lindsay, 2018).

In our analysis of such hidden displays built on refraining from action, we draw from Scott’s (2018) work on nothingness. Scott argues that non-doing can be a highly reflective practice of ‘choosing not to do something’ (Scott, 2018: 4), which may not have recognisable manifestations. She distinguishes between acts of commission, that is, doing nothing as a way of *rejecting a normatively expected action*, and acts of omission, which ‘occur when we more *passively* neglect or fail to act’ (2018: 5, our emphasis). We extend Scott’s (2018) work by exploring a form of *active non-doing*, namely one that the aunts feel is *normatively expected* of them. Our analysis shows that non-doing for the aunts in our study is often the result of a conscious decision because of their ‘consciousness of something’ (Scott, 2018: 4), that is, of familial boundaries that are not to be crossed. Such non-doing is a form of social action because it is ‘meaningful to the actor’ and ‘oriented’ in that it takes others into

account (Scott, 2018: 5). Scott's innovative work on nothingness and non-doing prompts us to rethink some of the conventional distinctions between activity, thought, and feeling. Drawing on Scott, we suggest that in some situations, caution, avoidance and self-restraint may be routine aspects of doing adulthood and of working out family responsibilities.

Methods

Our paper is based on a textual analysis of advice-seeking posts published in *Dear Savvy Auntie*, an American online advice forum for aunts. The forum appears as a separate section on SavvyAuntie.com, a website launched by Melanie Notkin in 2008. We have decided not to mask the identity of the SavvyAuntie.com site because it is the only one of its kind. Originally aimed at PANKs (Professional Aunt, No Kids), the website offers various forms of expert advice, suggestions on activities and gifts, and a ‘community’ forum for aunts. We focus on the texts posted to *Dear Savvy Auntie* by the aunts, because they tell powerful moral tales (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003) about aunthood from the perspective of the aunt, a hitherto under-researched topic. A textual analysis of the replies by the forum’s resident expert deserves a study of its own, and is beyond the scope of the present paper.

We view these posts as illustrative examples which relate to broader familial discussions around the position of aunts without children. Even though this is clearly not a representative sample of all aunts’ moral experiences, we can gain insight into how some aunts express their moral concerns and dilemmas. Indeed, we suggest that an important function of the *Dear Savvy Auntie forum* is that aunts can here unpack and discuss their everyday dilemmas with respect to their responsibilities as aunts. While they can probably share these dilemmas also in other contexts, for example with friends and some family members, what makes the forum significant is that there they can do so anonymously.

We conducted an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) which allowed us to capture the meanings and interpretations assigned by aunts in respect to their hesitations, internal struggles and attempts to work out their caring responsibilities. The analysis proceeded as follows. In August 2018, we reviewed all of the posts available on the *Dear Savvy Auntie* advice forum (n=233), and wrote comments in the margins of the texts. This process was an iterative one, meaning that we returned to the data multiple times and looked for connections and areas of overlap. This allowed us to identify themes that were repeated across different accounts. One of the benefits of this approach is that it allowed us to identify unexpected themes emerging from the texts (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

This rough coding indicated that a major theme was the question of what the ‘right’ thing to do is. This led to our decision to focus more closely on the issue of the moral dimensions of aunthood. In particular, our initial analysis resulted in the following key themes in relation to the focus of this paper: loyalties, hierarchies, lack of authority and the invisible and unrecognised nature of acts of moral aunthood. We then manually selected those texts that were centred around some kind of moral concern in respect to the welfare of the children (n=38). Our analysis of these focused on the themes and phrases aunts used to explicate their moral positions.

The analysis was conducted by both authors working together. In this paper, we offer a close reading of six longer texts that help illustrate our key findings. Our decision to focus on a small number of texts is so as to be able to show the nuances of how aunts discuss issues of everyday morality.

It is important to note that these themes are not representative of all aunthood experiences. First of all, *Dear Savvy Auntie* is an American advice forum which reflects a certain kind of middle-class consumer culture (Hayden, 2011: 2). Second, given the SavvyAuntie.com website’s intended audience of aunts who do not have children of their own, and the fact that in none of the posts we read did the aunts mention having children, we assume that the texts speak specifically to the experiences of aunts without children.

The *Dear Savvy Auntie* advice forum is public and can be accessed by non-members. The accounts are anonymous and the pseudonyms, given by the hosts of the site, usually reflect the content of the posts, which is why we have decided to refer to the aunts by these. In considering the ethics of use, we are treating the *Dear Savvy Auntie* posts as we would a print copy advice column (Bassett and O’Riordan, 2002). The Terms of Use for SavvyAuntie.com state that anyone using the site should be aware ‘that any message posted on our Site will become public and any personal information you post in an article will be accessible to any visitors to the SavvyAuntie.com Site’. The posts do not include any information that could directly identify people. While the site is public, in light of our wish to respect the women’s right to privacy and confidentiality, we have left out any potentially identifying details.

Holding back to keep the peace

It is common for the texts on the *Dear Savvy Auntie* forum to consider questions of mandate, authority, familial boundaries and what the proper thing to do is. In doing so, the aunts posting on the forum are acting as moral agents who ‘reflect upon the decisions they take and weigh up the consequences of their actions’ (Smart and Neale, 1998:114). Such deliberations can lead to uncertainty and self-restraint, as illustrated by our first example from ‘His Loving Auntie’:

My brother died years ago and I've done my best to be a support to my sister-in-law. One of my nephews is adopted and he confided in me that he has contacted his bio family. He hasn't told anyone else in our family including his mother although I have urged him to. It has been months. What is my responsibility?

In this post, the aunt has gained privileged knowledge concerning her nephew, and has done so before the mother. The silence that this aunt has held for months reflects a recurring theme on the forum, namely keeping quiet for the sake of family peace. Scott observes that ‘nothing can be practiced’ by ‘failing to speak’ and by ‘negatively *not saying* (declining to speak at all)’, and that such silences constitute ‘meaningful social action, which affects interaction order’ (2018: 13). But caring for family relationships by ‘holding back’ (Brownlie, 2014) is not without its ambiguities. ‘His Loving Auntie’ goes on to say that her nephew has confided in her because he is too afraid of telling his mother, but this leaves the aunt in a potentially difficult position:

He is nervous about how his mother will react; that she will be hurt. I know our other family members will be angry at me for not telling them. I've told him I will give him money to take his mom out to lunch and buy her flowers, but he's just not ready. What should I do?

The above text sheds light on a theme that appears frequently on the forum, namely the hierarchies that exist in extended families, in this case the hierarchy of who should

know what and when. The above account demonstrates how the aunt's orientation to nuclear family members positions her as an involved observer (Lahad and May, 2019) This in turn allows for a birds' eye view of the complexity of the familial power dynamics at stake. The post also reflects Morgan's understanding of how the notion of the family is created by family members through their daily activities (Morgan, 1996, 2011). Thus, the forms of doing and non-doing that moral aunthood entails, constitute familial membership and being a 'good' family member.

Knowing her nephew's secret puts 'His Loving Auntie' in a tricky moral position where, as her question 'What is my responsibility?' indicates, she experiences torn loyalties, to her nephew and his mother.

Lacking a mandate

In discussing their moral dilemmas, the aunts on *Dear Savvy Auntie* indicate that while there exist no clear-cut rules they could apply, their choices are to an extent constrained (Finch and Mason, 1993) by such familial hierarchies. This can lead to the uncertainty of not knowing what is the 'right' thing to do in a situation where each course of action means potentially letting someone down or hurting someone. Our second example, from 'Facts of Life' describes such a dilemma that has resulted from a visit to the water park with her niece:

Unfortunately, that day she had her period. It was only her second. She had no idea how it all "worked." She was clueless as to the facts about menstruation. I was thankful to be there to help her and to give her some information so she wasn't so traumatized.

[. . .] It is so sad to know that she is not being properly guided by her mother, my husband's sister. That means that she is learning everything from her friends which also means that she's not really getting the facts.

I am especially concerned because my own mother never really explained it all. If I don't think my niece is getting the sexual health attention she needs for her mom, can I give it to her myself?

Familial hierarchies are evident also in this account, as is the aunt's delicate position in relation to the parent-child dyad. Furthermore, the post by 'Facts of Life' exemplifies that, due to the interlinked nature of family relationships, how aunts experience their aunthood is inevitably influenced by their relationships with their siblings(-in-law).

While seeking advice as to whether she can intervene in the primary bond between mother and daughter, 'Facts of Life' is also making the case for such a breach by obliquely referring to the principle that children's well-being is imperative (see Ribbens McCarthy et al, 2003; May, 2008). She is viewing the actions of the mother through the moralising gaze that mothers are often subjected to. She implies that the mother's incompetence has left her niece 'clueless', 'not properly guided' and thus not in possession of 'the facts', and thereby 'traumatized' even. But all the while, 'Facts of Life' is hesitant about whether she has the right to intervene. Our contention is that this hesitancy reflects a lack of mandate to act (Morgan, 2002) that can present aunts with a moral dilemma: to do what she thinks is best for her niece or nephew, or to respect the familial boundary of parental authority.

The next post by 'Niece Left Alone' similarly attests to the recurring theme of aunts moralising parents' (particularly mothers') inadequate parenting. This text also brings to the fore the flipside of having no mandate to act, namely having the *privilege of not acting*, or of not being expected to act.

I could use some advice. My sister left my 11 year-old-niece home by herself while the rest of the family travelled 2.5 hours away for the day. I'm worried that that wasn't safe for my niece and my sister typically responds very defensively. I don't live in their town or I would have gone over. How would you handle this?

A parent expressing a similar concern over a child's safety would likely be expected to do their utmost to rectify the situation, while 'Niece Left Alone' can refer to geographical distance as a reason for not taking action. Yet she is *not* not acting: by worrying (an action that can be invisible) and posting on the site (anonymously), she is engaging in sentient activity and active sensibility (Mason, 1996: 27). For Mason

these are the care practices which involve being alert to family members' needs, often in ways not explicitly recognised or visible. We contend that while on some level, not having a mandate can excuse lack of action, by posting their concerns on *Dear Savvy Auntie* the aunts signal that their sense of worry lingers. In other words, 'silent co-presence' (Brownlie, 2014) as a family practice can come at an emotional cost.

The ambiguous position of the moral aunt

The following text by 'Distressed Auntie' brings together the various themes that have so far appeared in our analysis, and allows for insight into the ambiguities involved in doing moral aunthood: although presenting herself as morally superior to the mother— thus demonstrating her own feminine virtues of kin care — 'Distressed Auntie' finds herself as having no recourse to improve her nephew's life. In addition, while expressing genuine worry about her nephew's wellbeing and the future of her relationship with him, 'Distressed Auntie' seems to excuse her own practice of 'holding back' (Brownlie, 2014) by referring to how involved the grandparents are:

My 9-year-old nephew, E, still sleeps in bed with his mother, AND still wears diapers to bed because his mother is reluctant/too lazy to do what is required to help him to break this unfortunate habit. He doesn't really know how to wipe properly. He is incredibly protective of her and covers for her lies about her mental and physical ailments. His father is in and out of his life. If it weren't for my parents, E would have little normalcy in his life. They are very participatory, doing their best to make sure that he has everything that he needs.

[. . .] Despite being very smart and social, E has a great deal of trouble following basic rules of interaction with other kids. He has anger issues and suffers from ADD. He is medicated, and is a different person when he's on his medications, but his mother doesn't always administer them [. . .] E and I were close when he was little but at some point, when he started acting out, our relationship became very contentious. Disciplining him gets old, fast, for all of us. [. . .]

At this point, we seldom see him. E's mother and I don't have much of a relationship; between her jealousy of my life and me being judgmental of her own, it has just become too difficult. I think because my folks are so hands-on, I feel less pressure to get involved, for better or for worse. I have a tremendous amount of guilt around all of it. I don't know if I'm doing him more harm or good by being somewhat absent from his life. I keep hoping that we'll have a great relationship when he's a bit older and I can reason with him. But then I wonder if not having a real relationship with him in these formative years will contribute to his dysfunction and prevent him from trusting me. Thoughts, opinions, expertise would be most welcome...

The first recurring theme evident is the moralising gaze that 'Distressed Auntie' uses to judge the mother. The reader is to understand that the mother's poor parenting explains why her son is not behaving in an age-appropriate way, is not learning how to interact with other people and is not regularly given the medication he needs. 'Distressed Auntie' refers to a lack of 'normalcy' in her nephew's life, including a father who is 'in and out of his life', which has led to 'dysfunction'. We here wish to echo feminist critiques of how much more strongly mothers are judged than fathers and of the intensive mothering discourse, which offers mothers a very narrow space of action (e.g. Hays, 1998). But the childless aunt does not escape such gendered discourses of kin care. By presenting herself as someone who has better insight into the needs of her nephew, as well as the long-term implications of his upbringing, 'Distressed Auntie' seems to subscribe to normative constructions of child-centred femininity.

The second theme in the data that this account reflects is that the aunt perceives herself as being prevented from having a positive influence in the life of her nephew because familial boundaries (of which parents can at times be active gatekeepers) mean that the mother is ultimately responsible for her child's well-being. In these situations, we argue, aunts are engaging in neither acts of commission or of omission (Scott, 2018; 2019), but rather in a form of non-doing that is prescribed by norms surrounding family life: do not 'interfere' (May et.al, 2012). Third, despite the 'tremendous amount of guilt' that 'Distressed Auntie' is feeling as a result of her non-doing, she does not present herself as ultimately accountable for how her nephew

turns out – she is let off the hook, as it were, due to her lack of mandate to act. ‘Distressed Auntie’ is thus an example of how the aunt can also minimise her responsibility. Like ‘Emotionally Conscious Auntie’, she does so by referring to how involved the grandparents are. This appears to, to some degree, soothe her conscience over the fact that she is ‘holding back’ by not saying and not doing (Brownlie, 2014).

Hidden displays of moral aunthood

In this final section we move on to explore the following question: when doing aunthood entails ‘not interfering’ and ‘holding back’, what happens to aunts’ ability to display moral aunthood? We analyse a post by ‘Emotionally Conscious Auntie’ that helps to shed light on this issue of display. Once again, the starting point is that of perceived parental incompetence which the aunt fears might be harming the child:

I am concerned with my sister's behavior towards my nephew, 5. She stays angry at him and has made a few remarks (though not in front of him) that make me worry. She insists he has a terrible attitude and never listens to her. I don't know what is going on because I live across the country and only get to come home every so often. I am the youngest of our family and do not have children but I worry about my sister and nephew. I do not feel I can call her out on her attitude because I am not a parent (which sadly they remind me of quite often).

She made the remark today that she used to love him so much when he was a baby because he was good. Every time I talk to her he has done something to make her angry. The most recent incident was that he was supposed to ask his sister what she wanted from McDonald's instead he asked if she wanted McDonald's. When he told her that she wanted McDonald's she blew up at him. I mean she SCREAMED at him. My mother stepped in but the look on my nephew's face makes me think this has happened before.

I don't want my only nephew to think he is not good enough but I don't know what to do. Our family is not always the most emotionally conscious family

but I want to be there for these kids like people were for me. Please tell me what to do.

Despite expressing a palpable sense of concern for her nephew's well-being as she worries that he will feel he is 'not good enough' if things go on as they have, 'Emotionally Conscious Auntie' does not intervene and instead remains a silent bystander. She informs the reader that she lacks a mandate to act because she is childless.

While research on grandparenthood has shown that also grandparents must be careful to 'not interfere' (May et.al., 2012; Breheny et al. 2013; O'Dwyer et al., 2012), in this case, the grandmother *does* step in. We suggest that one reason for this difference in how the aunt and the grandmother act, geographical proximity aside, is that the grandmother might possess the requisite authority to 'interfere', based on her experience of bringing up children. When it comes to the question of whether or not extended kin have a mandate to act, the differences not only between aunts and other kin, but also between aunts who do and do not have children of their own, warrant further study.

'Emotionally Conscious Auntie' asks for help in figuring out how she can 'be there for these kids' given that she is not in a position to 'call her [sister] out on her attitude'. The implication is that she must find some other, less direct, way of offering support to her nephew. The aunts posting on the forum who find themselves in this position of lacking a mandate to act present themselves as 'ostensibly present in the frontstage region, where the action is ... yet not fully immersed in the performance', instead playing the role of supporting 'others' self-presentation' while they themselves remain 'ignored' and 'seen but not acknowledged' (Scott, 2018: 13). By adopting the position of 'silent co-presence' (Brownlie, 2014), 'Emotionally Conscious Auntie' is respecting familial hierarchies and boundaries. In doing so, she is engaging in a family display the aim of which is to 'demonstrate that relationships between individuals are effective in a family-like way' (Finch, 2007: 70).

But if a family display entails *lack* of action and silence, who then constitutes the requisite audience required to make the display 'fully operational' (Finch, 2007: 74)?

Similarly, Scott proposes that acts of non-doing ‘must be witnessed and ratified by an audience in order to be successfully accomplished’ as a display of identity (2018: 5). For those aunts who do not ‘interfere’, it is possible that their family members are unaware of the fact that they have intentionally *avoided* overstepping familial boundaries. In other words, we argue that in some cases, by engaging in highly conscious acts of non-doing, aunts’ displays of moral aunthood can go unnoticed, which then creates the paradoxical situation of *hidden displays*.

An important reason for posting on *Dear Savvy Auntie* could be that this offers a way of turning their ‘non-identity, non-participation and non-presence’ into something meaningful (Scott, 2018: 4). The forum offers an external audience from whom aunts can seek recognition for their hidden family displays and *visibly* claim a moral self, without fear of damaging the quality of their family relationships.

Concluding discussion

In this paper, we examine the moral dimensions of aunthood. The accounts we have analysed reflect the hesitations, fears and uneasiness associated with negotiating familial boundaries and responsibilities, which are not always clear-cut (see Finch and Mason, 1993).

Before we go on to discuss the theoretical implications of our study, it is important to revisit its limitations. *Dear Savvy Auntie* is an American online forum, and one that likely reflects the experiences of a rather narrow segment of aunts, namely professional aunts without children (Hayden, 2011). First, the aunts’ position as female kin without children of their own no doubt colours the moral dilemmas they experience as they negotiate their relationships with their extended families in relation to questions of bringing up children. Second, none of the posts we have read concern issues of material deprivation. In addition, a likely reason for why the lack of a mandate to act was such a strong theme in our data is that those aunts who *do* feel as though they can take action when faced with similar moral dilemmas might be less inclined to seek advice from *Dear Savvy Auntie*. It is also important to bear in mind that doing aunthood does not occur in a vacuum, and is likely affected by complicated familial dynamics, for example, between the aunt and her siblings or other extended

family members (Milardo, 2005, 2010). But because of the nature of our data, this question is beyond the scope of our analysis.

While the sociological literature on maternal moralities and doing motherhood is vast (see for example May, 2008; Donath, 2017; Hays, 1998; Nelson, 2006), the moral dimensions of doing aunthood have not yet been sufficiently theorised. Our analysis has aimed to fill this research lacuna and extend previous studies on aunthood by attending to the theoretical frameworks of everyday moralities (May, 2008; Mason 1993; Ribbens McCarthy et al. 2000), family displays (Finch, 2007) and Scott's (2018) theorisation of non-doing. This line of inquiry allows us to develop further the concept of moral aunthood and the sociological category of aunthood in general.

The posts on the *Dear Savvy Auntie* forum indicate that within the family, aunts can experience a 'career trajectory of non-becoming' as they learn 'not to do' (Scott, 2018: 8). In other words, aunts can feel as though they are expected not to act, not to be visible and not to have an opinion on what is going within the bounds of the family unit. Scott observes that when deciding '*not to*', the actor makes a deliberate choice to eschew a potential line of action' (2018: 9, emphasis in original). Whereas Scott is referring to normatively expected acts that remain undone, and therefore become conspicuous, the terrain we are exploring is muddier, in that the aunts were unsure of what could morally be expected of them, as both acting and not acting were likely to have morally ambiguous consequences. Thus, not acting can have moral consequences for the aunt who is unsure whether her not acting has had a harmful impact on her nieces and nephews. In other words, doing nothing is 'always productive of something' (Scott, 2018: 3).

Finch (2007: 73) proposes that in order for family relationships to have 'social reality', they must be successfully displayed. This explains why getting the doing and displaying of aunthood right is so important. The paradox is that for some aunts, one way of conveying the message that 'this relationship "works" as a family relationship' (Finch, 2007: 79) is to *not* make the display of the relationship visible, that is, to refrain from doing anything. The posts on the *Dear Savvy Auntie forum* recount many instances where aunts feel unable to challenge parents or to discuss moral dilemmas with them because doing so would constitute a breach of familial boundaries. In other

words, acting would amount to ‘interfering’ in the parent-child dynamic (May et al., 2012). Instead, aunts ‘hold back’ by consciously not speaking and not acting, thus engaging in a family practice of ‘background care’ (Brownlie, 2014). Aunthood is thus at times ‘done’ in the invisible space of non-action.

Consequently, we propose that there are likely many instances when aunts are unable to display moral aunthood within their families and the doing of moral aunthood remains overlooked. In such cases, moral aunthood could be seen as an expression of informal and unrecognised forms of feminine kin care. While the aunts in our data seemed unable to discuss their moral dilemmas with their siblings(-in-law), they display their care and concern for their nieces and nephews on the *Dear Savvy Auntie* site. The forum offers a hopefully receptive audience for these forms of non-doing that are presented as acts of caring for family relationships. Here, the non-action that makes up the display of ‘this is my family and it works’ (Finch, 2007: 70) can be made visible and gain some recognition.

A further dimension of aunts’ non-identity is that while their decision not to act ‘may go publicly unnoticed’, it can ‘still be of great personal significance’ (Scott, 2018: 9). The posts in our data concern moral dilemmas experienced by aunts in relation to their nieces and nephews. A characteristic of a moral dilemma is that no course of action is without its downsides. The choice can be between betraying a niece’s or nephew’s confidence, or failing to inform the parents of something important. Alternatively, the aunt can be faced with the choice between over-stepping their bounds by ‘interfering’ in the domain of parenting, or ‘holding back’ by not speaking and not acting, but thereby failing to follow the imperative of putting children’s well-being first. The strength of feeling that comes across from these posts speaks to the significance of family relationships for a person’s ‘sense of place in an ever-shifting world, which itself requires recognition by others’ (Finch, 2007: 73).

Doing moral aunthood is also subjected to the social dispositions of gendered care work. Extending previous studies on aunts (Davis-Sowers 2012; Ellingson and Sotirin 2006, 2010; Hayden, 2011; Milardo, 2005, 2010; Sotirin and Ellington 2006, 2007, 2013), we show that the position of the moral aunt rests upon on gendered formulations which conflate aunthood with care and nurturance. However, it is important to stress that while they may not have the same mandate to act as parents

do, the aunts are also not called to account for their acts in the same way as parents are. This means that even though they might not always ‘step in’ to act in the best interests of the child, they escape the regulative power of the moralising gaze, so often directed towards mothers in particular. However, the fact that these aunts are posting their moral dilemmas on the *Dear Savvy Auntie* forum, perhaps sometimes as a way of seeking absolution for their non-doing, indicates that they remain unsure whether they have done the ‘right thing’ and are at times troubled by their decision. Thus, the act of posting on the forum can also be read as a form of doing and displaying moral aunthood.

In conceptualising the hidden dimensions of moral aunthood, we have extended current discussions of aunthood and family moralities. The texts posted on the forum speak to a strong sense of moral obligation which at times cannot be expressed or is silenced and disregarded, leading us to argue that *acts of non-doing* can, paradoxically, simultaneously compromise the aunt’s moral commitments and be fundamental aspects of doing and displaying moral aunthood. Furthermore, by not acting, not doing, aunts can ‘confirm that these relationships are “family” relationships’ (Finch, 2007: 67). Whereas much of the literature on family practices and displaying family concerns visible practices, by suggesting the concept of *hidden displays* as a significant analytical category it is possible to bring to light subtle family practices that are based on silences, avoidances and hesitancies, many of which might not result in visible actions. We propose that attending to such hidden forms of morality could offer an important analytical tool within sociological analyses, not just about aunts or family relationships, but relationships and social interactions in general, for example in the context of the workplace (particularly with the rise of precarity in the labour market), and gendered, classed and racialised relations.

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