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# “You are what you eat”: Plant-Human Relations in Home Gardens

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## ABSTRACT

Gardening has been conceptualized as a practice that blurs nature-human binaries and connects humans to nature in rapidly urbanising worlds. Based on fieldwork on the Cape Flats, this article explores human interpretations of beyond-human experiences that are engendered in home gardens. It interweaves ethnographic data and theoretical frameworks like posthumanism, multispecies ethnography and actor-network theory to analyse these relationships. I collaborated with six interlocutors and their gardens to reveal how companionships with plants complicate, contest or conform to nature-human binaries. Through gardening, interlocutors recognize otherwise ‘invisible’ elements in the natural world as valued companions that co-produce healthy vegetables and co-create identities, emotions, practices, and justices. I also trace exchanges within the garden, contending that the gardening agents that are perceived capable of maintaining beneficial reciprocities are coded as companions, whilst others that become pests or nuisances. Through these insights, I aim to add nuances to the claims that gardening dissolves human-nature dichotomies.

**Keywords:** Multispecies, plant-human relations, garden ethnography

## Into the Garden

*"The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world."*

Michel Foucault

As Val leads me into her yard, she blooms flowery smiles and sprouts anecdotes about her children of both the human and plant variety. "This here," says Val motioning to a wall of colour and leaves, "this is my home." The garden is a green goldmine of upcycled and handcrafted features, ranging from an old clothes rack used as a plant hanger to several brightly-coloured paper-mâché creatures peeping out from behind plant stalks and pots. The space radiates a sense of well-organised hybridity. An array of pots in all shapes and sizes, containing plants ranging from fennel seedlings to a pineapple's spikey head, are layered and hung at varying heights against a wall. Val hovers over her spinach plants, admiring their translucent green glow in the hazy morning light. She praises a stubby start of growth before pointing out a speckle of damage on a larger leaf. As I inspect it, I have to remind myself that this tender attentiveness between her caring eye and this flourishing leaf will culminate in the snapping and stripping of harvest. "My emotions..." Val (Figure 1) says, hanging off the edge of a thought when I ask her about harvesting later, "...it's actually difficult to express the happiness and fulfilment I get when I cook with the veg that I harvested from my own garden. My babies are so important." It's my first day in the field, and I am already in awe of the incredibly strong connection between garden and gardener. Val is one of the six gardeners that agreed to let me into her agricultural world as part of a research project exploring beyond-human



Figure 1: Val and her garden. Photograph by Lauren Culverwell.

companionships. The six interlocutors—Val, Warren, Phumeza, Dorina, Rose and Norma—volunteered to be part of this study. They emerged from a pool of twenty urban gardeners that constitute part of "The Family Food Project." This practical course, which was co-founded by *Greenpop* and *Urban Harvest*, facilitates home food gardening, attempting to alleviate food insecurity and eventually foster sustainable entrepreneurship. Over the course of a year, participants learn about and engage in processes related to food gardening; ranging from earthworm farming to nutritious cooking. These lessons happen largely online and other than an initial workshop, gardeners do not interact with one another in person. These gardeners vary in age (from 30 to 72), employment status (retired to fully employed), education level (grade 9 to grade 12), gender (primarily female) and ethnicity (isiXhosa and Coloured) and location in Cape Town (Philippi to Schaapkraal). In this article I endeavour to co-theorise with my interlocutors and weave as many of their direct quotes into my writing to ensure they are "[speaking] as far as possible in

their own words" (Tilley, 2006:314). So as not to confuse these quotes with article quotes, the gardeners' words are cited without a year reference (e.g. (Val)).

Throughout my fieldwork, I drew on Burrell's (2009) conceptualisation of the field site as a network and Latour's (1990) emphasis on "site-making." Through these lenses, the research site was never a bounded, pre-given location to be found, but rather a network of "physical, virtual, and imagined spaces" (Burrell, 2009:181). I utilized a variety of methodologies to investigate these online arenas, mental landscapes and physical terrains. Given that online media is embedded in offline social spaces (Miller, 2017) and that the virtual is a valid ethnographic site (Burrell, 2009), I conducted semiformal online interviews, facilitated a prompt-guided "WhatsApp journal", collected photos, and maintained voice note conversations. The 'mobile prompts' were particularly useful because they enabled interlocutors to document their personal points of view through their preferred creative medium (photos, videos, text, voice notes, etcetera) (Albrechtsen et al., 2017). These online methods were effective because the interlocutors were accustomed to online sharing since the majority of the program's communication, support and training happens in a Whatsapp group. Given the value of in-person research, I also conducted a series of home visits, where I interviewed interlocutors, met earthworms, smelt soils, examined plants, recorded pest damage and generally explored the inner workings of the garden. Although I was an outsider, I immersed myself in the field, albeit in a limited and constrained way, to enhance my sensitivity to the process and the interaction of gardening. Furthermore, through interviews and informal conversations, I also tracked the imaginative labour that gardeners do as they make sense of their interactions with beyond-human worlds. I divided my time equally between the gardens which were largely private, individual spaces in backyards with few external human influences or visitors.

I was drawn to beyond-human relationships because although vegetable gardens in a plethora of forms punctuate Cape Town's urban landscape, comparably little scholarly attention is given to the rich worlds of meaning ascribed

to these human-beyond human assemblages. Instead, this spatial, financial, and social investment in urban food gardening in the city and in South Africa more generally is primarily researched in relation to food security. For instance, in Johannesburg, vegetables produced in domestic gardens reportedly played a significant role in reducing food insecurity (Tesfamariam et al., 2018) while in Cape Town and KwaZulu Natal it has been found that urban agriculture plays a minor role in sustaining household food security (Mfaku, 2019; Shisanya and Hendriks, 2011). This form of research encourages government programs, non-profit organisations (NGOs) and private initiatives to repeatedly cite the city's high unemployment rate and high levels of food insecurity to justify their support for agricultural ventures. For example, *Urban Harvest*, an NGO based in Cape Town, aims to address the fact that two-thirds of food-insecure households reside in cities by initiating "food garden projects that create employment and feed hundreds of people every day" (Urban Harvest, 2022, n.p.). This tapestry of local justifications is woven into global discourses of hunger and sustainability, like the United Nation's "Zero Hunger" and "Sustainable Cities and Communities" goals (UNDC, 2022). However, these types of reports and approaches seldom consider that these gardens are potentially more than centres of food production. I suggest that these debates that fixate on the links between food security and food gardening, while extremely relevant and important have potentially obscured the other forms of production within the garden space.

Furthermore, literature on home vegetable gardening frequently draws distinctions between economically marginalised individuals that garden for subsistence and financially advantaged individuals that garden for leisure or to connect with nature (Van Holstein, 2017). These approaches position subsistence gardening and leisure gardening as mutually exclusive processes and insinuate that gardens are less likely to be used to connect with nature in economically marginalised areas. While the interlocutors in this study do garden to save money and to access affordable food, reading their efforts only in this light overlooks the complex and meaningful beyond-human

relationships that grow in the space. The fact that all interlocutors in this study reported that they would continue to maintain vegetable gardens, even if their economic status drastically improved indicates that the journey of “soil to sustenance” (Sbrogna, 2018, 11) cannot be classified solely—or perhaps even primarily—as a means to “supplement household budgets” (Van Holstein, 2017, 1159). In light of this research gap, this article attempts to explore the experiences beyond food security that are engendered in home gardens, specifically the relationship that is grown between plants and their humans. This work also deliberately centres these connections—as opposed to anthropology’s traditional focus on human-human social relationships—as part of a movement towards beyond-human ways of doing anthropology.

## **Theoretical Roots: Growing in connection**

Seth (2013) theorises that by overlooking or misinterpreting nature-human attachments, the social sciences have encouraged an artificial nature-human dichotomy. Correspondingly, Degnen (2009, 151) argues that traditional scholarship has positioned humankind and nature as separate, and regarded social relations “between the realms of humanity and nature” as impossible. However, these divisions distort intricate human-nature networks and disregard the fact that humans are materially and mentally integrated into the biosphere, simultaneously shaping it and relying on it for life (Artmann et al. 2021). Scholars have repeatedly posited that beyond-human interactions need to be taken seriously if we are to flourish not only as a human race but as part of the complex interwoven spiderweb of human and beyond-human networks that make up our systems (Heitlinger et al., 2021; Artmann et al., 2021). My research attempts to move past the human exceptionalism embedded in the social sciences (Tsing 2012; Lowe 2010, Haraway, 2008), by demonstrating how intimate and impactful beyond-human gardening companionships can be to humanness. As Tsing (2012, 141) posits, even though these networks have often been denied, “human nature is an interspecies relationship.”

However, this nature-human dichotomy is not just an ideological division to be overcome through scholarly labour. As Dehaene et al. (2016) illustrate, there are multiple forces which lead to the material separation between nature and humanity. For instance, capitalism and urbanisation detach individuals from the mechanisms of nature associated with self-provision (Dehaene et al., 2016). The “metabolic rift” is a concept that captures this disruption of traditional nutrient exchanges and metabolic relations between humans and nature (Pungas, 2019). For example, because the roles of consumers and producers are largely separated under capitalism, consumers rarely feed waste back into the cycles of production, leading to soil exhaustion and a dependency on manufactured fertilisers to grow plants (Pungas, 2019). However, it is also vital to note that this metabolic rift is not experienced equally across South Africa. The country’s history of land dispossession and forced relocations means that many people of colour have been moved off good quality soil and onto infertile lands (Kgari-Masondo, 2008). Although in this paper I do not directly tackle the politics behind these relocations, suffice to say that the suburbs this research landed in were designated coloured or black areas during apartheid and gardeners frequently complained about their neighbourhoods’ poor soil quality. Part of what this article investigates is how gardeners push back against the metabolic rift through their garden companionships and through the practices that establish these connections. As Dehaene et al. (2016) contend, urban agriculture can be a tool to mend the metabolic rift and empower individuals to reshape their relationships to cycles of production and consumption.

I draw inspiration from posthuman and multispecies thinkers to explore these companionships. Both of these approaches simultaneously problematize and replace the nature-human binaries that have often distorted the intricate networks between humans and beyond-humans. For instance, post-humanism asserts humankind is only made possible by complex interwoven entanglements with beyond-humans (Ruzek, 2014). Similarly, multispecies ethnographies present the world as a “multicultured, [...]”

multinatured, magical and emergent through the contingent relations of multiple beings and entities" (Ogden et al., 2013, 6). From these perspectives, the individual is not interpreted as singular, isolated and self-sufficient, but rather as caught up in "[webs] of interspecies dependencies" (Haraway, 2008, 11) and implicated in a "plurality of existences" (Ruzek, 2014, 6). Home gardens are a fertile space to think about beyond-human co-production and connection since the plants, soil, produce and gardeners are all implicated and embedded in complex tapestries of multispecies interactions. Once these mutual dependencies are acknowledged and accepted, it becomes possible to understand why gardeners' interactions with agricultural worlds can be interpreted as symbiotic partnerships instead of merely one-sided processes of human cultivation. As Seshia Galvin (2018, 243) contends, gardening relationships can reveal some of humankind's "deepest and most abiding entanglements with the nonhuman world."

My research is therefore framed by Latour's (2005) actor-network theory (ANT) which, in its most fundamental form, claims that 'the social' needs to be redefined to expose the intricate networks of links between actors. According to this theory, people, beyond-humans and ideas "jostle against each other," (Hitchings, 2003, 100) and interact to shape social formations. Since Latour (2005) acknowledges that ideas and nonhumans are actors, I argue that gardens can be understood as a network of human and beyond-human actors that are conditioned by human imaginings and logics. In this paper, I build on two key ideas—the theory of reciprocity and the codification of life—that I believe have shaped the gardening world as "social" (Latour, 2005). According to Falk and Fischbacher (2003, 293), reciprocity is a "powerful determinant of human behaviour" and structures humankind's approach to the world. This principle of giving and receiving can be linked to the cycles of exchange in the garden space, as gardeners trade time, emotions, energy and material resources for deep beyond-human connections and produce. These practices of mutuality and reciprocation, according to Ogden (2013), suggest that humans are not bounded or singular but rather

spun into intricate beyond-human webs. The codification of life refers to the forms of classifications that gardeners employ to distinguish between 'useful' and 'non-useful' gardening agents (Chacon, 1982). As this article illustrates, only the gardening agents that have been coded as 'useful' or potentially 'useful' are accepted as companions and incorporated into the gardens' cycles of reciprocity. In other words, gardeners have constructed their own idealised version of "the social" (Latour, 2005) that excludes certain actors from companionship through a codification of life. This is not to assert that these actors gardeners deemed outside of this network contributed nothing to their garden; rather, these actors and their roles have simply not been recognised.

I also draw on Haraway's overarching theories of "species meeting" and "companion making" to frame this research. According to Haraway (2008), in the biological world, nothing produces itself; rather, everything is caught up in reciprocal interactions of 'becoming with' others. 'Companion species' is a term that encompasses all the critters that engage in these co-creations that "make us who and what we are" and complicate the boundaries of the "Great Divide between what counts as nature and as society" (Haraway, 2008, 27). 'Meeting' these companions, to Haraway, comprises more than encountering the beyond-human; after all, people encounter gardening agents like plants all the time. Rather, 'meeting' and 'companion making' involves acknowledging and knowing the beyond-human through moments of interaction, response, communication and respect. As humans acknowledge their 'companion species', they become intertwined with their identity, allowing a plurality to exist within the singular self. As Haraway (2008, 4) contends "to be one is always to become with many."

## **Developing Sight: Growing Eyes and Green Children**

Given that human life is impossible without botanical worlds, it is surprising that leafy beings are often portrayed as holding background roles or having loose and distant connections with humans (Seshia Galvin, 2018;



Pitt, 2016; Gibson, 2018). A plethora of studies contrast this “plant blindness” with the intimate human-plant companionships that can grow in green spaces (Seshia Galvin 2018; Alcaraz, 2019; Gibson, 2018; DelSesto, 2020; Pitt, 2016; Elton, 2021). DelSesto (2020) describes plant blindness as an adaptive brain strategy that filters out elements in individuals’ lives that appear unimportant to their daily rhythms. In other words, the jacaranda tree on the corner of the street or the patchy grass growing on the sidewalk often blur into invisibility because they are not immediately relevant to lived realities of their human neighbours. However, through gardening, interlocutors reported that they “started to really see” (Val) plants. Gardeners developed what I came to think of as “green eyes” as these agricultural entities were not just seen but recognised as companions. As Haraway (2008) contends and as highlighted previously, meeting the beyond-human is more than encountering; it is recognising the intertangled production of self in conversation with others. Therefore, I conceive of visibility not only in a physical sense but as a shift from living *alongside* to living *with*. Plants went from being inconspicuous elements of the everyday to nurtured and valued entities as they grew in significance through gardening partnerships. However, this “eruption into presence” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2014, 38) as the invisible become kin is not neutral or one-dimensional; like plants themselves, the meanings that these companionships develop have aspects that rest beneath the surface. In this article, I am interested in the kinds of meanings that germinate and flourish as plants become visible. I illustrate that these leafy lenses enable gardeners not only to become aware of plants but to also connect with them as “companions” (Haraway, 2016, 62) and as “part of [their] hearts” (Rose).

Although interlocutors do ideate their relationships with plants in different ways, the most visible imaginings were anthropomorphic and paternalistic. Interlocutors described themselves as “plant parents” (Rose), and their plants as “mummy’s princesses” (Phumeza), “my family” (Dorina), “my babies” (Val), “my little ones” (Norma) or as “part of my children” (Warren). While is it tempting to interpret these metaphors as analytically

insignificant because human babies and plant babies belong to separate domains (Alcaraz, 2019), Degnen (2009) and Archambault (2016) concur that dismissing the metaphors that gardeners use to describe plants glosses the complex relations that these characterizations foster. Norma, for instance, believes that “plants are like us because they need food and water like us, but most importantly, they [also] need love.”

## **Identities in Conversation: ‘Plantonalities’ and Personalities**

Turner (2014) contends that humans and beyond-humans shape and reshape one another in contact zones. As plants and humans interact and become responsive to one another in the garden space, their connection can enable new identities to germinate and flourish. For example, Hosking and Palomino-Schalscha (2016) record how a Cape Town gardener, Mama Bokolo, saw her garden plants in multiple lights; ranging from mentally therapeutic entities to nourishing food producers. In this instance, as plants take on certain associations (nourishing, healing, therapeutic, etcetera), the gardener can come to assume certain roles (provider, healer, nurturer, etcetera) in relation to the plant. In a similar vein, Archambault (2016) explores how, as a result of the affection and attention that Mozambican men invest in their gardens, their plants come to be imagined as lovers. Degnen’s (2009) study on English gardeners reveals similar kinds of identity formation, as they compared their roles as gardeners to the roles of loving and nurturing parents. These examples indicate that through plants-gardener companionships, mutually reinforcing identities can germinate and grow. As Rose (2011, 11) argues, we “become who we are in the company of other beings.”

By imagining their plants as babies and themselves as plant parents, gardeners engage in similar practices of identity formation. Gardeners assumed their identities as plant parents to make sense of the level of care that was required to rear “[plant] children [...] into adulthood” (Val). Hitchings (2003) theorises that caring is a fundamental human need that is woven into gardening practices (from pest

prevention to watering cycles). Growing or receiving seedlings intensified gardeners' parental identities and their caring instincts. The majority of the interlocutors experienced a potent mixture of anxiety, curiosity and excitement when they received or grew seedlings and became "a new mother" (Phumeza). As with most new parents, although the primary concern was keeping the baby healthy and recognizing its needs, gardeners also doted on their "new babies." Watching a seedling respond to care and unfold its first leaves, according to Dorina, was like "seeing your baby walk for the first time - you don't even know that your child could walk but then they can and then it's like *aaahhhh*."

Against this backdrop of plant parenthood, I came to regard the different forms of plant care that gardeners adopted as different parenting styles. On the one hand, Warren (Figure 2) explained that his babies were "well-behaved" and grew "straight and tall" because he exercised "control" over their growth. For instance, he places plastic rings around his spinach stems, to discipline them into growing "neatly" (Warren). On the other hand, Norma was far more tentative as a plant parent and revealed that she was scared she would make "[her] baby angry" if she tried harvesting her comfrey too soon. Similarly, Dorina adopted nurturing and protective parental traits, extending "extra love" to wilting plants and admitting that her "motherly instinct kicked in" when one of her spring onions was damaged. Haraway (2008) asserts that actors are co-created in relation to one another and that as we make or acknowledge our companion species, new identities emerge. Through this lens and through the gardeners' own ideating of identity, it becomes possible to understand how parental identities are cultivated within these companionships.

In relation to these parental identities, plants also came to assume different personalities or, perhaps more appropriately, 'plantonalities.' I coined the term 'plantonalities' because, although plants do not have a human consciousness from which to generate a personality, they are still very much alive and there is a specificity to the form that this life takes (Alcaraz, 2019; Degnen, 2009; Hitchings, 2003). For example, plants have dietary needs

and preferences (Degnen, 2009), agentively search the soil for nourishment (Gibson, 2018) and respond to changes in water, soil, sunlight, etcetera (Hartigan, 2019). Given that plants do what they know (Pitt, 2016), one might assume that 'plantonalities' are easy to decipher. It might be assumed that all it would technically



Figure 2: Warren's spinach. Photograph by Lauren Culverwell.

take is a google search to reveal the characteristics of the plant. However, 'plantonalities', as I conceive of them, do not merely refer to the nature of a plant's species, their planted environment, or their reaction to the care and resources they receive. Rather, 'plantonalities' are also produced through the gardeners' imagination as they personify and give meaning to the plant's reactions.

Therefore, 'plantonalities' shift not according to species, but according to the gardeners' personal and distinctive interactions with their plants. For example, while Phumeza's experience with pests predisposed her to characterise her spinach as vulnerable and "weak", Val depicts her flourishing spinach as "in charge, aggressive [...and] excited." Likewise, while other interlocutors' comfrey thrived, Dorina described her particular plant as "funny" because its leaves kept turning yellow and falling off. In this sense, the perception produces the subject (Ogden et al., 2013). As gardeners imagine plants in specific ways, they create distinctive identities for them. This is not to contend that 'plantonalities' are entirely detached from the species' characteristics or the general behaviours of plants, but rather that these features are filtered through

personification. For instance, the fact plants influence the well-being of other plants around them (Seshia Galvin, 2018) is anthropomorphised as fast-growing or dominating plants are dubbed “bullies” (Val) and plants struggling to outgrow one another are characterised as “fighting siblings” (Rose). Therefore, gardeners came to identify their plants not only through the program’s informative lessons but through their personal encounters and interactive relationships with plants (Degnen, 2009; Pitt, 2016; Vogl et al., 2004; Hitchings, 2003).

These experiences indicate that beyond-human companionships can and do enable human and beyond-human identities to bud and flourish (Archambault, 2016). According to actor-network theory (ANT) humans, beyond-humans and ideas create social formations and meaning in conversation with one another (Hitchings, 2003). Applying this logic to identity formation means that they are not only produced in isolation but are engendered through experiences and connections between actors. Therefore, plants enabled gardeners to grow identities as plant parents and, in turn, by assuming the role of plant parents, gardeners enabled plants to grow identities as babies. By entering into identity-forming processes with plants, the interlocutors shape part of themselves in relation to the garden space and shape a part of their plants in relation to humanness. While authors like Ingold (2011, 95) have contended that humans are a part of the environment and that through habitation “it becomes part of us,” I argue that the gardeners are also engaging in the opposite process. They are not only permitted plants to become a part of their identity but imagined humanness as a part of plants.

By personifying plants, gardeners pull these gardening agents towards classifications of humanness. This arguably blurs nature-human binaries because it invites more living beings into notions of humanness. However, paradoxically, this shift is also partly humancentric. Turning back to the notion of visibility, while it is frequently argued that plant blindness is humancentric (DeSesto, 2020), I maintain that seeing plants as “persons in their own right” (Seshia Galvin, 2018, 242) is also underwritten by a form of anthropocentrism.

While interspecies connections have often been acknowledged as blurring nature-human binaries, personified companionships ultimately position the human as the central point of reference. According to Ruzek (2014), the centralisation of humanness is the core of human exceptionalism. Although we may be plural and ‘become with’ others, not all beings are put together in the same way (Haraway, 2016). Therefore, while forming beyond-human connections on human terms is attractive because they are easily digested by humans (Haraway, 2016), these personified relationships partly overlook the unique make-up of beyond-humans (Gibson, 2018). Having said this, the anthropomorphizing logic only has extended so far and gardeners do remain aware of “the uniqueness of [a plant’s] existence” (Pitt, 2016, 86). For example, later on in this paper, I explore how gardeners justify the consumption of their plant babies through a cannibalistic logic that they would never apply to human babies.

## **Communication: Listening Leaves and Listening to Leaves**

Gardeners nurtured their plant-human companionships through audible and inaudible communication. The majority of the gardeners frequently spoke to, sang to, praised and scolded their plants. The reasons behind this communication varied and were dependent on the nature and purpose of the interaction. On the one hand, Dorina believed that speaking to her plants was essential for their growth and maintained that slow growth was a sign that she had not “spoken to them like [she] should.” On the other hand, some gardeners treated their plants as trusted confidants. For instance, Rose (Figure 3) told her babies “a lot of things” that she clearly was not comfortable repeating to me and Norma would feel “relieved when [she] spoke to [her] plants” and felt as if they “listened to [her] secret things.” Although plants are not indifferent to human voices (Alcaraz, 2019), they cannot understand these verbal discourses, be they confessions or celebrations. However, the plant’s inability to comprehend these communications is not the point; gardeners know the plants cannot understand them and yet they continue to speak to them. For example, even though Rose frequently sings

to her plants “like you sing for a baby”, she knows they cannot interpret the lyrics. Rather, the meaning of vocal communication is primarily found in the act of reaching out and in the attempt to share forms of meaningful human communication with these gardening agents.

Gardeners also verbally expressed their concern for their plant’s health. Questions like “why are you looking sad and what can I do?” (Phumeza), and “oh you’re lazy today laying like this? Don’t you know you need to start your day fresh, my darlings?” (Dorina) were routine exclamations. In these instances, the plant’s appearance was interpreted as a communication of their well-being, suggesting that they were not so much as speaking to, but speaking with their plants. According to Alcaraz (2019), communication extends far beyond verbal exchanges and all a conversation requires is a sense of responsiveness and a channel to facilitate this response. Although plants have “been widely regarded as inert and passive” (Seshia Galvin, 2018, 241), posthumanism and interspecies movements contend that plants are intelligent, agentic, communicative, observant and relational entities (Hall, 2011). Following this logic, they are not merely entities to be spoken to but can converse with observant caretakers through their physical states. Pitt (2016) outlines the possibilities for communicative, caring plant-human connections by citing an encounter where a gardener claimed that the plant would ‘tell’ them how to prune it. Likewise, a gardener in Degnen’s (2009) study asserted that gardening is about experimenting with conditions until the plant is “happy.”

As gardeners grew “green eyes”, they began relating to their plants as highly communicative companions in their own right. As argued above, although plants are constantly communicating their state through processes like flowering, wilting, thriving, seeding, and dying, much like babies, they cannot literally vocalise what they want or need. And yet, as McWhorter (1999) maintains, successful gardening is reliant on the gardeners’ ability to listen and respond to these non-vocal discourses. Similar to new parents, gardeners can only comprehend what their plants require by paying attention to these nonverbal signs



Figure 3: Rose’s “listening leaves.” Photograph by Lauren Culverwell.

and by compiling an index of appropriate responses over time. For example, if a plant’s leaves were brownish, it would mean that it was drowning and required less water or if a plant was wilting and its body felt soft it was a sign that the plant was “hungry [for fertilizer] or thirsty [for water]” (Dorina). Similarly, Rose explained that she would loosen the soil if her plants looked “bad or sick” so that they could have some “room to breathe.” Typically, interlocutors visited their gardens at least once a day to “listen to it” (Dorina). By “look[ing] at the leaves” (Val) during these daily visits, gardeners could determine the plant’s health and track how it responded to subsequent care and interventions. These examples indicate that part of what successful gardening meant to the interlocutors, was “listening to the plants” (Pitt, 2016, 85) and speaking back to them through verbal and non-verbal acts of care.

The claim that plants have agency has long been debated in anthropology (Sbrogna, 2018; Hartigan, 2019; Seshia Galvin, 2018; Degnen, 2009; Elton, 2021). Plants have been recognized as social, agential and communicative and there

is a scientific consensus that plants can “perceive, assess, learn, remember, resolve problems and make decisions” (Hartigan, 2019, 1). However, Elton (2021) asserts, plant agency also emerges through their connections with humans. As ANT illustrates, agency is not only produced by individual bodies, but is produced through relations of humans, beyond-humans and ideas (Hitchings, 2003). This sense of agency forms when a plant’s needs, likes and dislikes are taken into account in human-plant companionships (Elton 2021). In the interlocutors’ experience, plants revealed their sense of agency and their plantonalities partly through their “likes and dislikes” (Degnen, 2009, 160). Given that plants sense and react to environmental changes more strongly than animals (Hartigan, 2019), these likes and dislikes while not always easy to comprehend, were fairly easy to see. For example, Norma discovered that cabbage “got sick” when “water [was] sitting on top of the leaves” and Val likewise discovered that her tomatoes disliked having the liquid compost touch their leaves. Plants reacting negatively to some forms of care and well to others signaled another dimension to their ‘plantonalities’ and another dimension to the systems of gardener-plant communication.

These systems of plant communications were not always easily translated or comprehended by human actors. As Haraway (2008, 16) contends, companion species train “each other in acts of communication [they] barely understand.” After all, plant lives cannot be completely understood by the gardener and plants often respond to certain forms of care in what can seem to be unexpected ways (Turner, 2014; DelSesto, 2020). Gardeners reported feeling anxious when their language of care was not well received or when they could not interpret their plant’s leafy narratives. For instance, Warren, Val and Rose expressed that potatoes were particularly hard to “read” because big and healthy leaves did not necessarily mean that the potatoes were ready to be harvested. Similarly, Val admitted that she finds plant care stressful because while she does “pay attention to [her] plants, she [doesn’t] always know what they need.” In these moments, comprehension is decentred as “a precondition for conversation” (Alcaraz, 2019,

78). Gardeners’ inability to understand what their plants needed or wanted did not stop them from responding to them through acts of care.

These systems of human-plant communication contributed to a sense of relationality in the garden. Elton (2021) describes the concept of relational health as an ongoing process of well-being that is generated through companionships. The theory encompasses beyond-human connections, suggesting that health is constantly unfolding through partnerships with the natural world. Comparably, gardeners maintained that as they took care of plants, the “plants took care of them” too, not only through their nutritional value but through their emotive value. For example, Val said that they added “excitement” to her life and Rose said that she “loved her plants” because they kept her from being “alone” and helped her stay “busy.” Likewise, Phumeza said that her plants “give love” and help her “relax” when something is “eating at [her].” This root system of relational well-being between companions extended both ways; when their plants were in poor conditions, the gardeners reported that they would feel poorly too. Norma reported that it is “painful” to see her plants wilt in the heat and often tries to not “look at it” during the hottest periods of the day. Similarly, Phumeza said that when her plants are “struggling to grow” she also feels like she is “struggling [...and] feeling bad.” In this sense, the gardeners’ emotional state mirrored the physical state of the plants. Interestingly, Rose believed that this dynamic works the other way too, claiming that her plants “know when mom is not okay” because when she argues with someone near her garden or touches them with “angry fingers” the plants look sick.

This sense of relational health and the deep conversational connections that accompany it may indicate a blurring of nature-human binaries. After all, humans have spent decades building up what Ingold (2000, 8) describes as “a master narrative about how human beings [...] have progressively raised themselves above the purely natural level of existence to which all [beyond-humans] are confined.” In this hierarchical framework, plants are either cultivated and utilized to further human progress or ignored (DelSesto, 2020). To some

degree then, the emotive and communicative channels that gardeners build do break down this hierarchical narrative and blur nature-human binaries. However, there is also a reciprocal dimension to this relational connection and conversation. In contrast to gardeners who reportedly loved plants for their own sake (Archambault, 2016), the interlocutors established their affective relationships based on if the plant was coded as useful. For example, similar to pests, weeds were framed as the “bad guys” (Phumeza) or “threats” (Warren) to the garden unless they could be transformed into useful compost. This indicates gardeners were not necessarily blurring nature-human binaries but were rather selectively engaging with gardening agents that have been coded as useful. For instance, Val frequently reminds her plants that “[she] will take good care of [them] and in turn, [they] must grow nicely for [her].” This opens up a complex and intriguing space from which to think about the beings that come to be “companion species” (Haraway, 2016, 132) and the basis on which that connection rests.

### **Eating Babies: Cannibal Consumption and Reaped Reciprocation**

As previously discussed, the literature concerning gardeners’ connections with their produce in South Africa has been consumed by a focus on food security. However, as I have just shown, as gardeners spin themselves into beyond-human webs of relationality to produce vegetables, the gardens come to produce more than food. Sbrogna (2018) refers to the labour, energy, resources and time that goes into produce production as “embodied energy.” Since gardeners had watched this “embodied energy” accumulate through the cumulative labour, time, meanings, and emotions that they invested in their garden, the produce is imagined not just as the plant’s product, but as a beyond-human and human co-creation (Sbrogna, 2018).

Given the perceptions of plants outlined, I anticipated a tension between this personification and the cannibalism of “eating babies” (Val). However, on the contrary, these anthropomorphised ties contributed meaning



Figure 4: Dorina’s lettuce harvest. Photograph by Lauren Culverwell.

to harvesting, preparing, and eating vegetables. For example, Phumeza’s plants “call [her] from a distance” to harvest them because they are so “beautiful *and* mouth-watering.” In this instance, the plants are imagined as visually vocalising their edibility and inviting consumption because, and not in spite of, their position as communicative companions. This imagining relates back to the logic of reciprocation and the logic of “getting out what is put in” (Dorina—Figure 4). As Rose explained, the produce “are [her] babies but they also give [her] something [...] they must give back to [her] because they have taken.” In this exchange, the labour and love that characterise the gardeners’ personified relationships are tangibly reaped through the produce. From Phumeza waking up at midnight to check her plants for snails to Val spending her money on store-bought soil, the gardens consume the gardeners and their resources in very tangible ways. In other words, as gardeners eat their gardens’ produce, gardens eat up the gardeners’ time, energy, emotions, attention and resources. Therefore, these processes of reciprocity simultaneously helped form companionships with the produce

and justified the consumption of those ripe connections.

This reciprocal logic extends its roots beyond human and plant relations. A web of beyond-human interactions is spun as gardeners feed uprooted plants, vegetable peels and gardening scraps from the garden back into the garden through the worm farm or compost buckets. I find Haraway's (2008) theory of 'becoming-with' and Latour's (2005) conception of 'the social' to be useful framings to consider how mushy interactive networks form as soil, plants and humans feed and eat one another. This messy entanglement helps heal the previously discussed metabolic rift which separates production-consumption relations and the disrupted nutrient cycles that typically characterise this division (Dehaene et al., 2016). Furthermore, this reciprocation—of mutual eating and enabling life—helps gardeners to see gardening agents living through one another and thus maintaining relevance and life beyond their deaths. As Rose pointed out, endings are not necessarily deaths, because when she harvests seeds to grow later or uses the vegetable scraps as compost, the plants "never really die." While many gardeners did report a sense of loss after uprooting or harvesting a plant, there was also an overarching sense that this was "just the way it must happen" (Phumeza). In these moments, some gardeners actually talked their plants through this logic. For example, Dorina comforted her lettuce as she harvested it, explaining to it that "I need to take you out because your time has come [...] your period for growing is done so let us just enjoy you."

## Ripe Connections: Sowing Selfhoods and Eating Emotions

Given that as interlocutors glean a range of emotions that have grown alongside the plants as they harvest the produce, it is little surprise that far from being a mundane chore, harvesting is an anticipated celebration. For instance, Dorina is "100% proud of herself and her garden" when she gathers her spinach and Warren was "excited beyond words" when he last harvested lettuce. These emotive connections also coloured the cooking and consumption processes since the process of

growing food for oneself often prompts a sense of excitement around its consumption (Sarti et al., 2017). Although as Martin et al. (2017, 594) argue "the value given to produce from the garden [adds] to the value of cooking", gardeners also produced additional meaning as they cooked their produce and experienced its "sensual realities" (Dowler et al., 2009, 207). For example, Rose said she "loved" listening to "crispy crrrr crrrr" as she cut open her peppers and Dorina said loved tasting the "amazing" crunchy "tccchhh tchhh" of the spring onions.

Artmann et al., (2021) contend that the 'external' process of growing, harvesting and eating healthy vegetables, can nurture strong 'internal' human-produce companionships. However, I discovered that these internal bonds extended their root system beyond merely a connection *with* the produce to a connection *in* the produce. Through intense emotional, physical and mental labour, gardeners implanted part of themselves in the garden that was reflected in the harvest. Val explained that her produce is "[her] creation" and Rose is "happy" during harvesting because she thinks, "this is me right here. I am a harvest." Produce-human connections, thus complicate nature-human dichotomies and identities as produce is not just personified, but seen as part of the gardener as they extend a part of themselves into their gardens.

While food has traditionally been interpreted in anthropological literature as a representation of the self (Mintz, 1996; Delaney, 2004); in this instance, food was not simply a representation of the self, but was, in part, the self. As Warren says "[his produce] isn't like other vegetables; these are part of [him], they grow out of [his] hands" and Rose expressed that her vegetables "grow from [her] head and the heart." Tracing the 'you are what you eat' logic in relation to these sentiments, gardeners not only consume the produce, but also eat something of the parts of themselves—of the "embodied energy"—that they invested in the produce in the journey from cultivation to consumption. There is a recognition of part of the self within the gardening agent, further illustrating that the interlocutors' identities are caught up in a "plurality of existences" (Ruzek, 2014, 8). Contentions that cooking transforms raw materials from a "state of nature to a state of

culture” (Fischler, 1998; Levi Strauss, 2008), do not account for these moments of the reworking and collapsing of nature-human identities and for the binaries that occur as these relationships form.

Gardeners not only projected themselves into the produce but allowed the garden to plant something in them. For example, Dorina felt that her “determination [to be a good gardener is] growing” alongside her vegetables and Warren explain that “the more effort that [he puts] into the food the more he respects it.” Other interlocutors reported other traits, habits or emotions that have germinated inside of them through gardening. On the one hand, when the garden was flourishing this engendered “pride” (Rose) or “excitement” (Val) in gardeners. On the other hand, when the garden was not doing well, negative feelings like “sadness” (Norma) or “disappointment” (Phumeza) took root. Although plants cannot feel the emotions of the gardeners, they can experience the benefits of this emotional production as gardeners draw on their feelings and sense of relationality to motivate their plant care (McEwan and Goodman, 2010). As Haines (2021, 46) contends, “nonhumans [can] enact agency on [humans] through a range of [human] emotions.” Human emotions and labour tangle in reciprocal logics as gardeners attempt to give back to the garden through emotionally motivated labour in order to reap positive emotions and healthy produce.

The gardeners’ reaction to pest damage most clearly illustrates how this logic plays out and connects to the codification of life. For example, concern was etched into Phumeza’s face as she showed me her bird-tatted spinach leaves and explained how sick she feels knowing that her babies are being eaten (Figure 5). However, her emotional distress emerged not because her plants were being eaten, but because of *who* was doing the eating. In other words, part of the reason why pest damage was so distressing was that it did not feed back into the encouraged reciprocal cycle of eating and feeding that underpinned the gardening logic. Phumeza’s response was prompted by the sense that she was failing her duties as a protective, nurturing parent and, by extension, failing to maintain her role in the reciprocal

bond. Out of this sense of failure or success, gardeners grew either positive or negative emotions. These emotions could be mobilised, redirected, and contested, through physical labour and acts of care toward the plants. For instance, many of the gardeners created scarecrows, hung up flashing bottles or built net coverings for their plants to protect them from birds. Although food has been acknowledged to shape individuals psychologically, biologically, and socially (Fischler, 1998), in this case, produce was also shaping the emotional worlds of their consumers, which in turn, was shaping the physical gardening world. In moments like this,



Figure 5: Phumeza’s pest-eaten spinach. Photograph by Lauren Culverwell.

as Dowler et al. (2009) suggests, care is action because gardeners are blurring the boundaries between emotional labour and physical labour. This explains why gardeners like Norma saw their garden not as “work” but as a labour of “love.”

## Grown versus Bought: Tasting Difference, Tasting Small Justice

While food choices have long been recognised as protests against unsustainable or unethical hegemonic systems (Clark, 2004). Kirkpatrick and Davison (2018) assert that home gardening practices can articulate a radical protest against industrial production practices and capitalist consumption. While none of the interlocutors started gardening to explicitly reject contemporary capitalist production processes, a moral and physical distaste for store-bought vegetables and a strong preference for



homegrown grew up alongside the produce in the garden. As their convictions took root over time, they were translated into action *through* gardening practices (Dowler et al., 2009), allowing the interlocutors' gardens to be read as serious, albeit small, protests against the forms of production around them. By reconnecting the identity of consumer and producer gardeners were not only partly breaching the metabolic rift (Dehaene, et al., 2016), but attempting to produce vegetables on their own terms. Therefore, I came to think of the interlocutors' gardens as important spaces of "small green justice", a term that I coined to capture the fact that *justice is justice*, even if it was initially unintentional and even if it plays out on a small gardening scale.

Part of this "small green justice" involves speaking back to the current hegemonic systems of food production that, according to Heitlinger et al. (2021), are untenably humancentric and ignore how beyond-humans relate to humans. I also coined the term "intimate production" to express the opposite of this humancentric production. "Intimate production" is a phrase that describes the intimacy that gardeners invest into their produce as they nurture seeds into consumable products. This production was more "personal" (Dorina) because of the "effort" (Dorina) that was embedded in the produce. As Phumeza reported "[she] can't help being way more connected to their food" because "she's put love into it." In 'intimate production', gardeners knew and controlled what had gone into the plants or rather, what had not gone onto their plants. In other words, they "know [their] own" (Rose) in a way that contemporary commercial consumption does not facilitate. This concept can also be linked to the notion of food sovereignty, which according to Shiva (2021) encompasses sovereignty over your health and life but also extends to a deeper justice for and understanding of other lifeforms. "Intimate production" also captures something of the direct line between the garden's produce and the gardener's consumption. For example, Dorina said that her vegetables go "straight from the garden into [her] mouth." Similarly, Norma said that her produce was much better because it came "from [her] and to [her] pot." Unlike the average

capitalist consumers that have traditionally been framed as holding deskilled and disconnected purchasing roles (Dowler et al., 2009), the interlocutors were active, emotive consumers who enjoyed consuming intimately-produced products.

This direct intimate line between garden and consumption was frequently sharply contrasted with commercial production practices. The concern that producers are not transparent with their practices and processes is hardly a new phenomenon or even one that is particular to South Africa (Dowler et al., 2009; Clarke, 2004; Van Holstein, 2017). However, even though many of the interlocutors live in Philippi, a semi-agricultural district in Cape Town with sprawling open plots of farmland, there is still a deep-rooted distrust of commercial production. Gardeners felt that the produce they bought, although perhaps locally grown, was not fresh, had been processed by too many hands or was stripped of its value. Since store-bought vegetables have to meet certain standards of consistency, safety and cleanliness, they are often presented in ways that are divorced from the realities of production (Dowler et al., 2009; Clark, 2004; Fischler, 1998). As vegetables are washed, standardised, processed, and packaged, evidence of the individual and intimate realities of production that allowed gardeners to connect to their vegetables are eliminated or invisibilised. To the gardeners, store-bought produce is not, as Fischler (1998) contends, without identity but rather they are imbued with tainted identities of disconnection. If the gardener's produce contains something of the gardener's personhood and emotions, then store-bought produce contains notions of commodity fetishism, chemical usage and secret practices. For instance, in contrast to 'intimate production', Norma complained that "big farms don't even know their plants or where they end up."

The most commonly lodged concern against commercially produced vegetables was the rumoured high chemical usage that industrial farming requires. Even though gardeners did not exactly know what chemicals farmers were using, there was general a distrust of this aspect of commercial production. While homegrown vegetables were "pure pure pure

pure” (Warren), commercial produce was typically seen as “very bad for your health” (Val). The majority of gardeners not only saw commercial produce as “contaminated” (Martin et al., 2017, 593) by chemicals but following the ‘you are what you eat’ logic, maintained that eating store-bought vegetables could contaminate the human body. For example, statements like “if you eat chemicals, you become chemicals”, or “[home-grown is] healthy and it keeps you healthy” (Warren) were frequently repeated as a means of acknowledging that food can “enter into what we become” (Bennet 2010, 51) and that “every food is reckoned to have an effect on the body” (Fischler, 1998, 280). Gardeners thus utilise these beyond-human relations to tangibly know and shape their own health in meaningful ways. The gardeners’ awareness that their health is so closely intertwined with the health of the produce does not simply blur nature-human dichotomies but does so in a very specific way with a very specific set of terms. As discussed previously, connections to beyond-humans in the garden space were established on the grounds that interlocutors would benefit from the companionship.

## **Gleanings: Conclusions and Final Thoughts**

Turner (2014) contends that humans and beyond-humans form part of an interconnected mesh of life-sustaining strangers that shape and reshape one another. However, as Pungas (2019) posits, in relation to food production, this mesh becomes less noticeable and less intimate as the roles of consumer and producer are separated. Home gardening is thus a particularly interesting practice because gardeners are partially bridging the consumer-producer divide and actively knitting themselves into interspecies companionships. Yet, as this article has also attempted to illustrate, the relationships that gardeners grow with their plants extends beyond merely the practice of food production and into deeply loving and nurturing bonds. By growing, harvesting, preparing and eating home grown produce, gardeners are engaging with a hodgepodge of reciprocations, emotions, embodied energies, reciprocities, imaginations and projections of the self into the beyond-

human. Much like the veins of a leaf, the themes in this article are connected and crisscrossed. The imagining of plants as babies leads to forms of verbal and non-verbal care and communication. Likewise, the conversations that gardeners have with their plants contribute to their personification and systems of intimate production. The midrib from which these rich imaginings branch is the visibility of plants and the making of green companions out of plants. It is through seeing plants as valuable entities that these systems of meaning, identity, communication and relationality are established that allow for small green justices to emerge.

On the one hand, as this article has attempted to illustrate, nature-human binaries are broken down in these processes. Plant-human partnerships allow gardeners to break down the notion of a singular, isolated body by taking the interconnections between the health of the plants and their own human bodies seriously. As the interlocutors come to see themselves and their health as embedded in the plants and produce, they recognise that “becoming human [is] an interspecies collaborative project” (Rose 2011, 11) and that part of their humanness emerges through these physical and imaginative connections with gardening agents (Ogden et al., 2013). In this sense, “engagements with other-than-human beings inspire new ways of relating” (Archambault, 2016, 247) to and in the world.

On the other hand, the “codification of life” (e.g., “plants” versus “weeds”) and the cycle of reciprocation cause these kinds of classifications to emerge. The relationships that gardeners form with plants and produce are clearly contrasted by the stark rejection of any entity that could not explicitly engage in clear cycles of reciprocity or mutual benefit. Thus, I have suggested that a breakdown of binaries only occurs when a beyond-human has been classified as *useful or potentially useful* to humans. The engagements, while leading gardeners to an understanding of their interconnect-ness to nature, are, first and foremost crafted in relation to their utility to gardeners. While authors like Artmann et al. (2021) argue that urban gardening is a way to combat the fact that urbanization compromises

residents' engagement with natural worlds, a question emerges around the nature of the connection itself. Frameworks like post-humanism that reject human/beyond-human hierarchies and embrace the interconnectedness of all species (Ruzek, 2014) thus do not neatly map onto this landscape of classifications and selective companionship. This coding and the reciprocation that accompanies it adds nuance to claims that gardening blurs nature-human binaries (Martin et al., 2017; Artmann et al., 2021; Heitlinger et al., 2021; Turner, 2014).

Bearing this in mind, it could be posited that if the artificial binary between nature and humans is *truly* artificial, then pointing to a humancentric attitude is a moot point. If we are all in processes of 'becoming with' others, then what does it matter if plants take on human traits? After all, to define something as humancentric is to understand humans and their ways of relating as separate from the natural world. And yet, just because the binary is artificial, it does not mean that it has and does not wield real power and impact the world in material ways. As literature around the metabolic rift illustrates, nature-human division disempowers individuals and damages ecological cycles on small and large scales (Dehaene et al., 2016; Pungas, 2019). Furthermore, even the fact that gardeners kept saying that their gardens are a way for them to connect with "nature" indicates that nature is still conceived of as an entity separated from them as humans that they can "connect" with. Therefore, it is important and relevant to pay attention to the nature of the relationships that appear to break down human-nature dichotomies, even if they contain contradictory logics. This article has attempted to open up a space from which to consider the ways that contemporary environmental practices may be re-centering the human at the exact moment that they seem to be dissolving binaries. As the species turn anthropological circles gains traction (Seshia Galvin, 2018), paying attention to the nuanced layers of meaning that underwrite beyond-human relations in spaces like home gardens is salient if we are to begin to understand the effects and potentials of these connections.

Having said this, it must be acknowledged

that this article itself has also centred itself around the human experience. I have only examined how humans understand these companionships, while sorely neglecting the narratives in the plants. As Heitlinger et al. (2021) argue, humans are still speaking on behalf of beyond-humans, and often doing so through very humancentric lenses. However, it is not that these beyond-humans are silent, it is that they are silenced by the questions that researchers ask and the research we do. However, there are also real attempts in recent scholarship to decentre the "human both in subject matter and research methods" (Sbrogna, 2018, 74). This is not to contend that researchers and gardeners can fully know or respect beyond-human terms and signs (Gibson, 2018), but to suggest the potentials for connection. My research has sought to recentre interspecies companionships, which according to Artmann et al. (2021), have often been marginalised in anthropology. However, there is room for a multi-disciplinary project that draws on disciplines like soil and plant sciences to demonstrate how all actors in beyond-human relationships respond to one another in the context of home gardening. Furthermore, there is also space to investigate how wider historical, political and economic systems inform and shape beyond-humans and the ways in which they relate to humans.

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# Learning Differently: The Struggles and Silver Linings of Dyslexia

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to understand the struggles and joys of individuals who have dyslexia. Situated in sociological theory, I contend that dyslexia is biological by nature, but socially constructed as a learning disability. This social construction is culturally shaped and bound by values of nonverbal communication which, consequently, is the area in which dyslexics struggle the most. Using a content analysis style of collecting data, I read hundreds of blog posts aiming to understand the experience of dyslexic individuals living in the United States. This article delves into themes of education, upbringing, and individual perceptions of self. I also explore how an accurate diagnosis of dyslexia can improve learning, which often helps promote positive self-esteem. This study explores how to find the gifts of dyslexia to redefine genius for individuals in Western societies.

**Keywords:** Dyslexia, learning differences, social constructions of learning

*Everybody is a genius. But if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid.*—Albert Einstein

**M**any people associate Einstein with dusty textbooks, physics, and the gold standard of genius. In the midst of all these triumphs, many people do not know that Einstein was dyslexic. Dyslexia is an unexpected difficulty with reading and processing written language that is biological in origin (Shaywitz 2004). Individuals with dyslexia are often very bright and do struggle with phonological awareness (Peterson and Pennington 2015).

Drawing on blog posts and documentary interviews of dyslexic individuals, this paper explores the struggles and joys of living with dyslexia in our Western society. There are many constructed barriers that people with dyslexia can experience. This can range from difficulties communicating through written language to struggling with driving directions. I focus on the main themes that emerge from dyslexic stories of navigating the academic world and learning to redefine their strengths as individuals with diagnosed dyslexia. Here, I argue that one never overcomes or outgrows their dyslexia. Instead, dyslexic individuals learn to live with it; they learn to dance around the struggles involved with growing up dyslexic in a reading-focused society. I also explore how narrow our cultural understanding of literacy can be. People who are dyslexic challenge this conception of literacy by proving that there are multiple ways to learn and interact with written language (Shaywitz 2004). I also suggest that the social construction of what smart is defined to be is the main factor that holds dyslexics at a disadvantage. The mainstream definition of

intelligence is influenced by society and bound by the cultural values of the time (Hiscock and Kinsbourne 1982). Moreover, our society has identified dyslexia as a “learning disability, and, for the purpose of this paper, I will focus on using the language of specific “learning difference” as a replacement. Altering this language shifts the understanding of dyslexia from a stigmatized societal disadvantage to a “difference” which denotes advantages and disadvantages.

## Dyslexia Discourse

Historically, dyslexia has been examined through an often-misunderstood psychological lens that has emphasized the differences in the brain structure of dyslexics compared to neurotypical individuals (Campbell 2013). Developmental dyslexia resides under an umbrella of neurodiversity, which can be thought of as the differences in brain function that an individual is born with (Macdonald 2009a). Throughout the past twenty years, a broader understanding of this specific learning difference has emerged throughout disability studies and sociological disciplines. Examining dyslexia through a disability studies lens has expanded cultural understandings of literacy. This, in succession, has allowed educational institutions the ability to recognize the unique abilities of each dyslexic child. The main theories central to my project have been the social model of disability and the sociological imagination. Recent literature in the field of Education and Psychology has revealed what is known about dyslexia, the social construction of dyslexia as a learning disability, and the formation of self that dyslexia impacts.

## The Politics of Reading —Understanding Dyslexia

A basic understanding of language and reading is that learning how to speak is innate and natural, but that reading is not. Sociologist Campbell writes that, during the twentieth century, as “literacy became central to production,” people were starting to be diagnosed with dyslexia in the West (2013, 1). As reading and writing became an essential part of Western society, the formation of dyslexia as a diagnostic category emerged in 2013 (Campbell 2013). Diagnostic criteria for learning disabilities are relatively universal, but dyslexia

is diagnosed at higher rates in cultures that utilize reading and writing in their society (Macdonald 2009b).

People with dyslexia often have “difficulties attaching the appropriate labels or names to letters and words,” but there is no evidence suggesting that dyslexia is a visual or sight issue (Shaywitz 2004, 100). It is important to note that verbal expression for dyslexics can exceed that of their neurotypical peers, but challenges arise when they must formulate their thoughts on paper (Shaywitz 2004). Hiscock and Kinsbourne (1982) explain the learning difference as being a spectrum of academic ability. Although there are neurological similarities between dyslexic brains, the learning difference still presents in unique ways for each individual. Cerebral dominance appears to be a major explanatory factor of dyslexia. For example, educational systems place an extreme focus on the left hemisphere of the brain, which is precisely the side that dyslexia affects. Dyslexia is a spectrum of decoding and word recognition difficulties that is often associated with highly intelligent individuals that have intact sensory abilities (Peterson and Pennington 2015). The learning difference is associated with “aberrant structure and functioning,” which appears particularly in the left temporal lobe, occipito-temporal and temporo-parietal areas of the brain which are in charge of the reading and language networks (Peterson and Pennington 2015, 283). It takes people with dyslexia longer than a neurotypical person to decode written material, though this has no association with lower capacities to learn and problem-solve.

### The Social Construction of Dyslexia as a Disability

The construction of disability in cultures across the globe is socially created (Wappett and Arndt 2015). It is difficult to find cross-culture perspectives and comparisons on learning disabilities such as dyslexia (Vaidya 2010). A possible explanation for this is that dyslexia has not yet been recognized as a learning difference in many countries. This comparative conversation remains broad and never specifically mentions dyslexia as a disability. Ginsburg and Rapp (2013) discuss disability as being a profound relational category that is often shaped by social conditions that make it

difficult for individuals to fully participate in society. The anthropological understanding of disability spans beyond just the brain and body; it is created by “social and material conditions” (Ginsburg and Rapp 2013, 53). This social construction of the word disability is generally referred to as being a physical impairment that interferes with daily social functions (Granfield 1996). Researchers who use a sociological lens to examine disability generally focus on communities and their views of physical disabilities. This is used more often than expanding the definition of disability as being related to invisible impairments or learning differences. The social model of disability focuses on the ways that “social environments impose limitations upon certain groups or categories of people” (Barnes 2007, 135). This model also places emphasis on the community and aspects of society that are difficult for individuals with disabilities to navigate.

Western educational systems label children with learning disabilities as a method to systematically identify them in larger classroom spaces. In academic contexts, ideas of disability are often formed from the special education lens that tend to label children with specific disabilities. Dyslexic children are often left out of this category because their overall skills may not mirror the same severity as the other special education kids. There is less focus on the sociological perspective that emphasizes children’s well-being in relation to their social surroundings (Tomlinson 2021). More often than not these labels become stigmatized, and form negative aspects of a student’s academic identity (Shifrer 2013). Titchkosky (2012) explores the social understanding of disability in our culture. The focus for Titchkosky (2008) is on analyzing the physical struggles of diagnosed disabilities in higher education and argues that disability can act as a social power that often reproduces the status quo of what is expected of individuals in society. Understanding how disability impacts the formation of self and social interactions can help shed light on dyslexic experiences.

## Social Impacts of Dyslexia in Relation to the Formation of Self

Due to the prominence of dyslexia being understood as a disability in the conceptual frameworks of psychology and education, there has been little research done to “locate dyslexia within a sociological context” (Macdonald 2009b, 347). Among the sociological studies that have been conducted, the social model emphasizes that barriers are constructed for dyslexic individuals in our society that derives all of its information from text-based formats (Macdonald 2009b). If society placed no importance on reading, then dyslexia would not be considered a disability. There are many social factors such as access to outside support and documented testing that play a role in how dyslexia is diagnosed. Diagnosis manuals are not used by all countries and leave room for cultural interpretation (Jutel 2011). A major relevant factor in the sociological studies of diagnosis is the social framing and definitions surrounding disease. Dyslexia is biological by nature but socially framed which means that those who have dyslexia are born with the learning difference that will not change based on the socio-economic status or upbringing of the child.

However, there are still many cultural and income-based factors that can impact a child’s access to dyslexia testing, diagnosis, and support. If a child is born with dyslexia, they will be dyslexic for life—providing support for the child can help with the difficulties of the learning difference but will not allow a child to “overcome” or “outgrow” their dyslexia. If not given the help and or support needed early in the child’s schooling, difficulties with reading comprehension and understanding can become heightened. The lower a child’s socio-economic status, the greater chance they will meet the “diagnostic criteria for developmental dyslexia” (Peterson and Pennington 2015, 286). This is thought to be due to the lack of support that the child is receiving in and out of the classroom. It is important to note that there is a lack of clear evidence that supports this claim because there is little literature written which discusses the “social implications of dyslexia and socio-economic positioning” (Macdonald 2009, 49a). The majority of literature published

on dyslexia is rooted in psychological theory, which focuses on data sets pulled from the middle class. These data sets typically stand alone and lack any comparison to people residing in the lower class who often lack access to dyslexia testing and educational resources (Anderson and Meier-Hedde 2011).

Social factors that impact a child’s educational track also play a role in their own conception of self (Howard 2018). People with dyslexia often experience high rates of stigmatization and lowered self-concept (Howard 2018). Children with dyslexia are also at higher risk for “developing negative self-perceptions of themselves as learners” (Gibby-Leversuch, Hartwell, and Wright 2021, 5595), but not of their overall self-worth. These self-perceptions often begin to form in the child’s early experiences in formal education. Dyslexia-friendly schools that focus on community and parental agency often influence children’s self-esteem and view of themselves as a learner in positive ways (Griffiths, Brahm, and Burden 2004). Another factor that impacts dyslexics’ formation of self is the classroom environment. Paniagua (2017) claims that there is no normal when it comes to learning. Discrimination against children with learning disadvantages creates the opportunity for children to diminish their own self-worth (Paniagua 2017).

This literature shows that generally dyslexia is examined through a psychological perspective or disability studies lens that mentions learning differences as a whole with no specific focus on dyslexia. By nature, a dyslexic brain perceives and interacts with the world in ways that differ from those who are non-dyslexic. These alternate ways of making sense of the world become apparent when a child must learn to access written language (Shaywitz 2004). There is a clear lack of understanding and research done in the field of sociology in relation to dyslexia and our cultural understanding of literacy. My contribution to this literature will appear in the form of personal stories that showcase the dyslexic experience. These stories shed light on the social impacts, triumphs, and hardships of being dyslexic.

## Research Methods

The idea behind this project was derived from my own experience as a dyslexic individual. My personal struggles with dyslexia lead me to search and discover online platforms for individual dyslexic stories, which is the data that I used for this project. The stories I used for this project were posted online between 2012 and 2022. The research to find these stories was a product of simple searches with keywords that kept my focus on personal stories of dyslexia. I utilized public blog posts and documentaries that focused on showcasing individual stories. These unfiltered stories were an expression of the dyslexic community's ability to unite through online platforms to promote a greater understanding of the learning difference. The intentionality behind using this data was to expand my reach of whose stories I had access to read and hear. I selected these blog posts and documentary films to discover a wide variety of stories about dyslexics' experiences navigating school and life.

I analyzed more than forty blog websites that focus on providing dyslexics with a platform to write their stories. Some of these sites included: 'The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity,' 'The International Dyslexia Association,' and other personal online blogs that were designed for public viewing. In addition to that, I watched individual interviews on educational sites and informational videos that were linked in the blogs. Lastly, I watched documentary films that specialized in showcasing the dyslexic experience. I read (N=100) online blog posts and watched (N=5) documentary films.

The method I used to analyze this data was content or thematic analysis which required me to familiarize myself with the data before I began coding the stories. Then I used qualitative coding to organize and categorize the stories I chose. I sifted through each story while taking notes, identifying codes, and finally choosing the main themes which emerged from the data. This paper does not cover everything that people with dyslexia experience, but it has unraveled some prominent themes that can be related to a broader understanding of dyslexia in relation to sociology. It is also important to note that my research lacked racial, gender,

and socioeconomic comparisons. The bulk of stories examined for this project were shared by white, middle-class, dyslexic individuals. I believe this trend in data is because people in this category have received a formal diagnosis and dealt with navigating the public school system.

The dyslexic community has been utilizing online platforms to write their stories because there is a shared identity between all its members. I sensed that folks felt empowered on these sites, and it was a privilege to read them. The stories I used for this project are mainly from students and adults with formal dyslexic diagnoses who felt compelled to write and or speak on their experience. The quotes and stories I will share in the following sections are from children in the thick of school all the way to adults reflecting on their early schooling and life with dyslexia. The major themes that emerged from this data were: feeling stupid, the power of diagnosis, and redefining genius.

## Feeling Stupid

In most student blog posts that I read, dyslexics described feeling stupid and often anxious in the classroom growing up. The ableist word *stupid* was used to describe how many dyslexics felt about themselves in relation to school, and more broadly in daily life as an outcome of their learning difference. This societal creation of disability has caused these individuals to internalize their thoughts instead of providing them with the tools needed to succeed. In school, the writers shared their frustrations with themselves and their capacity to grasp academic material. Allison, who works as a paralegal, shared on a blog post that she often compared herself to classmates growing up. She states, "no matter how quickly I attempted to work through a problem, I was always so far behind. I started to give up, knowing that I would never finish in time. Although I felt stupid for the first time in my life, I didn't want my classmates to think the same." Comparing oneself to others is naturally human, but in the school setting, the dyslexic bloggers seemed to exacerbate this difference. Jennifer expressed her experience with peers as being foundational to her self-image. She states, "I would look at my friends and not

understand why they were able to do things that I couldn't. I guess sometimes I felt almost, I wouldn't say envious of my peers, but I felt a longing. I wished I could partake in what they were doing. Talk about the latest book that someone read." This sense of craving the ability to relate to classmates is a common experience of the dyslexics I researched for this project.

Sometimes, this lack of ability to *keep up* with everyone else can lead one to attribute their self-worth in comparison to others, and or their performance in the classroom. Anna shared her experience growing up dyslexic:

Lots of the time I take the parts of learning that are still hard for me as rejection—as someone telling me I can't. I see points taken off for misspelled words on in-class English essays, and I start to see my future crumbling. I see the kids with better scores, who don't need tutors, or extra time, and I feel jealous. I feel worthless.

Relating one's self-worth to something as small as a misspelled word sounds like a drastic comparison to make. But to these individuals, this is reality; a misspelled word feels as though it translates to a college rejection letter. Many bloggers related their self-worth to academic achievements, which can result in a great deal of anxiety related to being in the classroom.

Feeling anxious was a common description that many dyslexics used to describe their experience in K-12 education growing up. Izer shared that he still remembers his reading circle in early elementary school as feeling like there was "no way out. Everybody was there to discover that 'oh my god, he can't read.'" That feeling stayed with him for a long time. Alex also remembers his teachers and peers thinking that he was "'lazy and just didn't want to work,' but it was always more than that...I wasn't grasping what was being taught to me. I just got pinned as being lazy or not trying. Teachers maybe just assumed that I would get it or that I didn't care, and I was dumb." This was not an uncommon feeling that many of these storytellers experienced resulting from early education. These emotions and discomforts with being in the classroom lead many people with dyslexia to 'hate' school and

the broader academic world.

Sam expressed that, "school was really hard. I thought I annoyed my teachers by asking them too many questions so I just would spend my whole school day trying to disappear." This idea of escapism into an imaginary world or alternate place other than school was a common theme in the dyslexic body of stories that I read. Brent shared that school was a "nightmare" and it was "literally the last place I wanted to be." In his 9th grade class, he was asked to read aloud "I panicked" he stated, "In my mind I'm like how can I get out of this? what can I do? I started guessing at words and you hear kids laughing and snickering... wondering what is going on... and it still plays in my head to this day... so many years later." Trying to escape outside of the classroom, outside of reading in general was expressed by many dyslexics. "Why would I want to be in a place that asks me to do what I struggle with most" said Dame, a dyslexic who hated school growing up. The school system is not set up for a dyslexic brain, so it is no mystery why dyslexics struggle to navigate academia and often feel *stupid* when they don't succeed. Jamie posed the question: "who said education is what we say it is. Oh, because a couple of dudes set up the structure of it?" I wonder if dyslexics' stories about school would change if the system was indeed created for them. Would fewer dyslexics feel stupid? In an interview about dyslexia, young Charlie shared:

When I'm in a reading group and it's my turn to read it gets stressful because I don't know the words and then someone in my class says, 'you just don't want to read because you don't know how.' *How does that make you feel?* Very upset about it, like I don't belong there anymore. *Are you upset at the school or are you upset at yourself?* Upset at myself more than the school. *Even though it's not your fault, you realize that right?* No, not all the time.

This idea of *feeling stupid* is a way that dyslexics attribute their self-worth to school. It is often a challenge to separate the self and feelings towards the self from academics. They are intimately connected to many dyslexics. Richard

added the point that “it’s the definition of what stupid is though, like everyone is good at something different and I believe that I am good at other things, and I only discovered that when I left school.” I found that as dyslexics moved through their schooling the degree to which they attributed their beliefs about themselves in relation to school lessons. Brian shared that, “it got better when I felt I wasn’t dumb, it got better when I decided I wasn’t stupid—I was actually pretty fucking smart.” Many years separate Charlie and Brian, which is apparent in their quotes and feelings towards themselves in relation to academia. To help ease the burden of navigating academia, many dyslexics turn to their formal diagnosis as a platform to help them advocate for their learning in schools.

## The Power of Diagnosis

Learning about one’s dyslexia is a process that often begins in early schooling and continues throughout adulthood. Some people are fortunate enough to be diagnosed in early elementary school and some formally learn about their learning difference through the diagnosis of their children, or from self-diagnosis later in life. Having a formal diagnosis is a godsend for some and others struggle with having a learning difference label. About a fourth of the stories I read directly discussed their experience of being formally diagnosed as dyslexic, some mentioned it at the start of their post, and other folks chose to focus on other aspects of their story. Dyslexia is classified as an invisible disability, so more often than not, one’s dyslexia is unknown to others. There are many pros and cons to identifying with dyslexia and its varying physical, academic, and mental limitations.

Children diagnosed early in their education often benefited from having a formal label. I found that this is often because the label allows one to attribute their dyslexic struggles to something tangible; it can take some blame off the self. Anna shared her story of discovering that she was dyslexic in the first grade. She was watching the show *Arthur* on TV and an episode where the main character’s friend discovers that he is dyslexic. Anna said that the character had “unique ideas and outlooks on the world.

He saw things in a different way than his classmates and there was nothing wrong with that. He was just dyslexic.” After watching the fifteen-minute segment she ran to her father and stated loudly: “dad I’m sisplexic!” It gave her struggles a name and shifted her perceptions of self. Similar to Anna, Hope shares that after she was diagnosed as a child she “began to believe for the first time in a long time that [she] could adequately do the work and compete with [her] peers if given an appropriate amount of time to do it and do it well.” After Hope was diagnosed, she was “relieved” and yet “was not completely sure of what it meant to be dyslexic either.” For many, having a formal label of *being dyslexic* or *having dyslexia* is a step in the right direction. It does not necessarily make the path easier to follow, but it can help clear up some mud along the way.

Late diagnosis is also very common among dyslexics. Often, if a child is diagnosed as being dyslexic one of their parents also has the learning difference but lacked a formal diagnosis as a child. Brent self-diagnosed himself after his daughter experienced struggles in school and was diagnosed by a learning specialist outside of the school. He states that “it meant the world to me to understand that there was something else going on besides me just being dumb or stupid.” This new perspective of how Brent learns provided him with the self-acknowledgement that school was hard because he was dyslexic, not because he was stupid. Brent shares that, “school was a nightmare for me, it was literally the last place I wanted to be and I’m happy that my daughter has the resources now to make it an easier place to be.” It is very common for parents to self-diagnose after watching their children navigate school early on in their learning. Like Brent, Anthony was motivated to get formally diagnosed with dyslexia in adulthood after viewing a documentary on the learning difference. Before being diagnosed, Anthony described his experiences with dyslexia as being a force that, “destroyed [his] confidence enough to a point where [he] quit school.” He states, “luckily that didn’t destroy me, but I’m sure there are a lot of people who aren’t as lucky.” Knowing that he was dyslexic, even later in life helped to alleviate some of that struggle.



Formal diagnosis and the impact of having a dyslexic label can impact everyone in different ways. It is important to note that the individuals who shared their stories here found power in identifying with their diagnosis of dyslexia but that is not true for everyone. Alex knew he was struggling and having that label changed his life for the better. He shared how being diagnosed gave him hope. Alex wrote, "it's easy to throw in the towel and say okay I'm dumb and I'm stupid I just won't go anywhere with my life, but I knew I wasn't dumb, and I knew I wasn't stupid. So, I kept going and searching for an answer, which I eventually found." After formally receiving a diagnosis or self-diagnosing dyslexia, people can begin to identify with the learning difference in unique ways. Dillion shares, "I didn't choose to have dyslexia, but I have accepted it and the life lessons it has taught me. I think I have become a better student and better person because of my challenges and that is pretty cool." On a similar note, Dame shares that he has learned to fully embrace his dyslexia and all the joys that come with it. He states, "I have no regrets about having dyslexia at all. I think it gave me different strengths and resilience." This kind of resilience has been named by many dyslexics as being a factor in their success later in life. Orlando mentions that he felt labeled by dyslexia: "I didn't like that feeling, however that feeling is what also kicked me to work harder in a way." This label of being dyslexic comes up as a negative and or positive feeling for dyslexics. In opposition to Orlando, Sky states that her diagnosis was "something concrete to show myself that I was working hard, I was doing my best, I was just doing my best in a system that was not set up for my unique brain." For many, identifying with a label can help alleviate self-blame surrounding reading and writing performance.

The students and adults who shared their stories for this project described dyslexia as feeling physically limiting in terms of what they can read, write, or achieve, while also feeling extremely mentally limiting. These physical and mental limitations can compile and leave the dyslexic individual feeling diminished. Sami elaborates on this idea by stating that "there is the physical part of not being able to do certain things, and then there is the limiting mental aspect in which I wrongly evaluate myself based

solely on a socially constructed norm about what smart is." Dyslexia is not a physical disability, but there are aspects of the brain difference that feel physically limiting to many people. Rob shared his story of being pulled out from class at a young age to take IQ and a variety of verbal tests. The woman scoring him stated, "you are going to redo second grade. It happens to a lot of kids." Based on the stories analyzed for this project, I discovered that children with dyslexia are removed from their classrooms all the time for extra help and testing. That is part of the physical consequences of the disability. The mental limitations come after one realizes that there was a reason they were removed from the normal class and brought to the *special* room; they are different... they are dyslexic.

For people who are diagnosed with dyslexia, many learn to overcompensate for their *inadequacies*. This academic overcompensation generally begins in early elementary school and continues throughout college. Learning how to navigate the academic world as a dyslexic is essential for positive self-development. In public education, many children with dyslexia receive extra help. This often happens if their support systems in and out of school advocate for them. While in the school system, people with dyslexia typically spend a great deal of time learning how they learn best. No one experiences dyslexia in the same way, which is the beauty and the difficulty of the learning difference.

To help children make their way through the formal education system accommodations like extra time on tests and individualized education plans are used to help assist kids in the public school system. Blair received a lot of extra help in school and made the point that "supporting a student with dyslexia should be no different from supporting any student." Small accommodations like extra time can make all the difference. Sky said that "dyslexia robs a person of time, but accommodations give that back to the student." Extra time on assignments and exams is not the entire solution to help one navigate their dyslexia in school. But with extra time, many students, like Allison, saw their confidence improve. In the college setting, Allison was also able to see her grades improve

when she was given extra time to write papers and take exams. She expanded on this by stating that her academic achievements were also a “result of going into office hours twice a week with my calculus professor or making sure I went to extra hours with my history TAs to talk about the exam.” These folks shared that navigating school and academia is a process of advocating for oneself and learning how to learn.

Developing self-advocacy skills while in school has been a foundational experience in many of the dyslexic journeys that I have observed for this project. Derick stated that, “I have had to learn that it is okay to ask for help; that took me a while.” There is a degree of self-assurance that is required to accept help from others and still know that you will have to work twice as hard regardless. Allison stated: “I have two big regrets in college and, no, neither of them is related to attending parties or my love life. Regret number one: Not asking for extra time sooner. Regret number two: Letting labels dictate how I perceived myself.” Learning how to ask for help and accepting that help heavily influences the success at which these dyslexics speak about their academic experiences.

Learning to learn is another foundational experience that many of the blog posts I read shared. Blair states, “while all dyslexic students are classified under the same umbrella term, they will likely have unique ways of compensating for their reading disabilities. Therefore, there is never one simple answer for how these students should approach learning in school.” Every dyslexic, like every student, learns in different ways that are often unique to them and their learning styles. Brent stated his thoughts on this by sharing that, “we all learn in different ways, and it doesn’t make you or anyone less smart.” What is important to keep in mind is that the ability to reason, think creatively, and understand abstract concepts is fully intact. Reflecting on these stories, I found that often their ability to create new meaning and make important connections between ideas is strengthened as a result of the phonological and grammatical deficits. Creating new meaning from existing content is part of learning how to learn. Orlando shares that, “once you learn how to

enjoy the process of learning, academics become blissful and not a chore.” Understanding one’s own dyslexia is a learning process in itself, filled with much trial error, frustration, and surprise.

As these individuals have filtered through school and grown up, they often learn that they are smart, capable, and intelligent humans. But this fact is often discovered after years of overcompensating in academia. Allison states that, “there are no rules demanding you learn the materials by running around three bases. You may have to run around twelve.” These dyslexics have had to learn different ways of getting around. And that often helps in the real world. Brian shares “in school, there are set ways of doing things and you must perform those actions correctly to receive a high grade. Dyslexics’ brains have to find other pathways to get to the end result in school, they must think outside the box, and I think that that transfers over to life.” In life, there is no set way of doing things – one must live outside the box to make it. Dyslexia does not go away; one just learns to work around it and with it. Learning to work with one’s dyslexia is a part of redefining their own learning style and genius.

## **Redefining Genius: The Gifts of Dyslexia**

The stories I read indicate that dyslexics believe they naturally have the tools needed to engage with the real world. They have the ability to see the whole picture. Orlando shares that: “my imagination, which I think is the gift of dyslexia, is what’s also given me different kinds of insights and perspectives. I can look at anything and think through it in a way that is unique to me.” Many of the stories I read mentioned this awareness or ability to create alternate pathways for understanding. This idea that one must discover their own way of learning material was heavily present in the stories I read. Brian also shares that “as a dyslexic you always have to learn different ways of getting around. And I think that that helps in the real world.” What is important to keep in mind is that the ability to reason, think creatively, and understand abstract concepts is fully intact. Often, a dyslexic’s ability to glean new meaning and make important connections

between ideas is strengthened as a result of the phonological deficit.

Dyslexics have many gifts beyond the academic world. The stories from dyslexics that I read shared their strengths as being persistent learners, having a good work ethic, being good at simplifying, having high levels of empathy, as well as being creative and imaginative. Jared shares that “I have the ability to see patterns in narratives where others may not and an intrinsic ability to understand big ideas or evolving situations and be able to explain them to others.” Many dyslexics are very bright and would say that their dyslexia allows them to make sense of world events. Luis explains that his dyslexia has gifted him the ability to “solve problems others can’t as my brain works differently, dyslexics are used to receiving setbacks so if the first attempt doesn’t work, we will try and try again until we find a solution to a problem.” This is the process of learning how to learn. Overcompensating and working hard to discover the best way one learns can become a strength but does not always feel like one. Sam shares,

The most annoying aspect of it is when people equate a learning disability to a thinking disability. So, when you live in a society where this is the case... you get good at simplifying content and working twice as hard as everyone around you. That’s just what you have to do; it never really felt like a choice or accomplishment to have to work harder than my peers.

Many of these dyslexics are often good at right hemisphere functions and often overcompensate for skills that are attributed to the left hemisphere, such as reading and writing.

The blog posts indicate that people with dyslexia see themselves as great simplifiers. Maggie shares that she has learned to boil it down until I know it by heart—to take notes until it’s too easy to understand and remember. Dyslexics often say what they mean and mean what they say, extra words just complicate things. Learning how to identify and implement critical aspects of material is an individual skill that takes time to master. Sami states, “being

dyslexic enables you to simplify things very quickly. It enabled me to see the big picture and I could make decisions more creatively and effectively as a result.” Of the content I read and watched for this project, I found that dyslexic minds are great at stripping away unnecessary detail to create clear, compelling messages. Many of the adult dyslexics who wrote in are excelling in careers where explaining, educating, or influencing are key, such as teaching, marketing, and journalism.

People with dyslexia also talk about how they have high levels of empathy and creativity. It is unknown if these social and cognitive skills are innate to people with dyslexia or if dyslexics just learn to focus on right hemisphere brain functions more than neurotypical folks. Joseph shares that “I was a very creative kid. I was never bored. I am into architecture now and I may become an aerospace engineer. I have to be creative. I am not a 9-to-5 type of guy; I am hands-on.” Thinking outside of the box is where dyslexics often thrive and where many choose to focus their energy on more creative professions than your typical desk job. This drive to think in creative ways can be attributed to the need or desire to make things work for their unique brain.

Molly works in public schools to help educate parents and teachers about learning differences and she is dyslexic herself. She states “one thing we know for certain about dyslexia is that this is one small area of difficulty in a sea of strengths. Having trouble with reading does not mean that you’ll have trouble with everything. In fact, most kids with dyslexia are good at lots of other things.” Many people with dyslexia who struggled with reading and writing in elementary school go on to college and professions they love. Many of the adult stories I read focused on words of encouragement for young people. Sarah states that “dyslexia is tricky because no two brains with it are the same. My dyslexia is not your dyslexia, and neither of us should question how smart we are because we have it.” These dyslexics have learned to embrace what they have, and own that their brain operates differently.

Dyslexia is with one for life and with that comes a tremendous amount of self-discovery

and redefining what smart means for oneself. Sami shares that, “you have to redefine what you give meaning in your life. There are SO many ways to be smart and excel in life other than school. Find your bliss and follow that as far as it will take you.” Similarly, Piper expressed, “I used to put so much time into trying to ‘overcome my dyslexia.’ And so many years later I have realized that I have nothing to *overcome*.” Dealing with dyslexia is not always fun and not always easy, but within it, there can be so much joy. It all depends on how one defines *genius* for themselves. Jamie shares with young people, “I wish I knew earlier that there are so many ways to be a genius.” Adding to the conversation, Taylor shares that “passion outweighs any disadvantage you have. There are restrictions in the world, but if you really want something, there are usually ways to figure it out. Get creative with how you navigate things.” These dyslexic individuals value creativity and exude passion for life. Dyslexia has many gifts and dyslexic individuals are *smart* in every definition of the word.

## Conclusion

Dyslexia is a complex learning difference with many hardships and beauties. Based on the stories that I had the privilege of reading I found that many dyslexics can attribute their self-worth to school. This was often the result of being placed into an education system that has not been set up for a dyslexic brain. Therefore, reinforcing this need to pave one’s own path as a dyslexic in the academic world. A frustration with academics often led these dyslexics to feel stupid, or like they did not belong in academia. Additionally, folks shared their experiences with being diagnosed, learning how to learn best for their unique brain, and how to build advocacy skills in school. When listening to and reading individuals’ personal stories about having dyslexia it is impossible to not bring up school. Experiences associated with navigating education are often deeply foundational in one’s dyslexic journey. This idea of feeling stupid in the education system was also bound to a central concept that emerged throughout reading the dyslexic stories. The central theme that arose out of the struggle was redefining *genius*. If academia is not set up for a dyslexic brain then what is? These folks know that they

have many gifts that stretch beyond formal Westernized education. These gifts were often discovered after the individual dyslexic decided to redefine *genius* for themselves.

I contend that one never outgrows or overcomes their dyslexia. One learns to live with it and work around what is difficult. There are ways to make the journey through school and life easier to navigate, but that often takes effort and resources. Dyslexia typically feels like less of a burden after one is no longer in school and is provided with the space to show their knowledge in alternate ways beyond just reading and writing. I suggest that dyslexia is biological by nature but socially constructed as a learning disability. This presentation of dyslexia as a disability has been formed by the societal importance of reading and writing. If society placed greater value on people skills and creative ways of expressing knowledge, then dyslexia might be categorized as less of an academic disability or learning difference and more of a learning strength. This contributes to sociological and anthropological understandings of how we as a society define smart which is culturally bound and influenced by the times. The word smart has been socially constructed and infused with meaning. Which individuals are gifted the title of smart or genius is deeply related to the values of the society in which we live. Our culture values written communication skills and therefore has labeled dyslexia as a learning disability.

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## New Norm, Old Obstacles: The Impact of Distance Learning on Student Agency during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

Mandatory distance learning implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic has produced a new educational landscape for elementary students. Working- and middle-class students have had to meet new expectations around class attendance, homework, and time management, and some are now responsible for overseeing their own education. This study examines students' agentic expressions and perceptions of time to explore the effects of these expectations, and to contribute to a discussion about the implications of distance learning. Through participant observation and interviews with elementary school students across four Southern California school districts, this study offers insights into how students conceptualize their new role in their education and it provides concrete examples of how this manifests day-to-day. Students from ages five to thirteen learning from home, especially those with limited assistance from guardians throughout the school day, have new responsibilities and a greater sense of "their time," through which they simultaneously discover and establish their position as agents in their education.

**Keywords:** Elementary students, distance learning, COVID-19, socioeconomic status



experiences. Furthermore, the independence necessitated by these conditions led some students to experiment with their agency regarding their education in ways that the conditions of in-person school are not typically conducive to.

## Methods

Near the end of 2019, as a community college student preparing to transfer to a four-year university, I had been planning my first semester-long, independent anthropological research project. I intended to study spirituality in the United States. However, by March 2020, when schools were forced to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic, my original project lost its urgency. The moment I observed my five-year-old cousin (with whom I lived) open a Chromebook and join a Zoom classroom, I felt compelled to change my topic.

My primary method for this investigation was ethnography, specifically, participant observation in the anthropological tradition. Ethnography is cultural representation through textualization (Ricoeur 1973). The art of ethnography is negotiating the tension between producing an account of what you have observed and needing to re-create it to do so. This re-creation, what Geertz (1973, 9) refers to as “construction”, starts in our minds based on everything that we have experienced in the field and jotted in our notes, and is informed by our preconceptions about fieldwork, the field, our unique personal and academic backgrounds, and takes form, through textualization, in the written product of ethnography. The ethnographer’s task, as Emerson et al. (2011, 62) calls it, is “to write descriptions that lead to the empathetic understanding of the social worlds of others.” To do this, the ethnographer at once creates and discovers meaning:

...while the ethnographer often experiences “something going on in the notes,” neither the fieldnotes nor their meanings are something “out there” to be engaged after they are written. Rather, as creator of the notes in the first place, the ethnographer has been creating and discovering the meaning of and in the notes all along. (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2011, 190)

In December 2019, a novel strain of coronavirus named SARS-CoV-2 appeared in Wuhan, China sparking the first outbreak of a disease later to be called COVID-19. Despite travel restrictions from China and several European countries, cases arose in the United States by January 2020 and subsequent attempts to prevent the virus’ spread were inadequate. By March 2020, public schools across the country were being closed to slow the spread of the virus, and early concerns were being raised about the impact this may have on students, notably, children who rely on school lunch not having enough food, and a widening gap between privileged students who, for example, have the resources at home (computer, internet access, familial support, etc.) to succeed in online classes and those who do not (Chavez 2020; Blume and Esquivel 2020). These disparities were confirmed by a *Los Angeles Times* survey published in July 2020 of twelve hundred families across forty-five Southern California school districts, which found that “the digital divide is continuing to harm the education of low-income Latino and Black students,” with most of the impact stemming from a lack of funds for learning supplies, a lack of an appropriate and quiet place at home to do schooling, and a lack of internet access (Blume and Esquivel 2020; Esquivel et al. 2020). The author warned that “these inequities threaten to exacerbate wide and persistent disparities in public education that shortchange students of color and those from low-income families, resulting in potentially lasting harm to a generation of children.” (Esquivel et al. 2020) I set out to ethnographically explore from the student’s perspective what this “potentially lasting harm” may be. I found that, of these disparities, differences in support during the school day had the largest impact on students’ schooling

Ethnography was well-suited to this research because I was interested in exploring how distance learning was affecting students. Spending time with them as they participated in it was my approach to sharing and attempting to understand their experience.

One methodological concern in doing ethnography was how to “make strange” a field that I participate in as a college student (Delamont 2017). Seeing as this was my everyday reality, there were doubtless aspects of it that I took for granted. The issue is that taking things for granted does not produce quality ethnographic data. In *Keys Themes in the Ethnography of Education* (2017), Sara Delamont suggests that to conduct original and enlightening research on education, research aimed at “producing luminous descriptions, causal explanation, and peopled ethnography,” we must “fight familiarity, stop focusing on schools, [and] devise more robust foreshadowed problems” (Delamont 2017, 6, 15). Delamont offers six “strategies to fight familiarity” which I took into consideration when theorizing how I personally would “make strange” the domains that I would be observing (Delamont 2017, 15). Distance learning, specifically attending class virtually, was entirely new to me, but I further defamiliarized it by, as she suggests, not focusing only on schools and classrooms. I was deliberate in looking at peripheral, yet still related, settings to distance learning, specifically student’s time at home before, after, and in-between “formal” distance learning activities; video calls that students organized and managed themselves to interact with each other; and tutoring or supplemental education whether in the form of homework help from parents or siblings, or private tutoring carried out by an organization other than the school. This proved to be essential because it led me to conclude that part of what makes distance learning so unique and consequential is its way of making one the home and the school, consolidating “free” time and “school” time, and blurring the boundaries of student agency.

The study participants were recruited based on access that I had (working at a non-profit tutoring center) to students and educators from local school districts. Additionally, considering

the limitations to conducting participant observation during a pandemic, I recruited three of my younger cousins, two of whom I was living with at the time. I supplemented my participant observation with interviews that I conducted in-person with family members who felt comfortable meeting, and over Zoom or Google Meet otherwise. The IRB at my institution determined that a formal review would not be necessary based on the nature of this research. Aside from the family members that I was near, all data collection was virtual to ensure the safety of my participants. I collected data between September and December 2020. The study included fourteen students from ages five to thirteen across four school districts in Southern California. I obtained written consent from parents/guardians for the students to participate in research, as well as verbal consent from the students.

One-on-one interviews with students were loosely structured around the topic of school-from-home with some emphasis on emergent themes such as time, space, agency, and friendships. I encouraged students to talk freely about their experience with distance learning and asked for elaboration when these themes arose. Most interviews were about an hour long, and I had multiple interview sessions and regular interactions with the students over the course of the data collection period. This approach, more time with fewer students, had its drawbacks, such as limiting the diversity of my sample but it enabled me to capture and analyze richer, more encompassing pictures of students’ lives to better assess the effects of distance learning that extend beyond the virtual classroom.

One interesting trend I noticed was that all the students with whom I spoke were enthusiastic about discussing their experience of distance learning with me. I, too, was enthusiastic to talk to students about distance learning because I was curious about what different school districts were doing, what worked and what did not, and what the students liked and disliked about it.

Additionally, I participated in digital learning environments by sitting with students (in-person) through their digital school day. This was only possible with my own family

members, who felt comfortable with me being physically present amid a pandemic. Even across different school districts, conducting research with multiple related participants (like in a family) can undesirably affect the outcomes of a study like this intended to explore the effects of a phenomenon on a larger population. Keeping this in mind, I limited related participants to three and chose them so that they would represent two different school districts. I also participated in peripheral (apart from scheduled class time) virtual situations with students, such as supplemental instruction, tutoring, and activities organized either by a school, other educational organization, or students themselves. I focused on student's behavior in these digital spaces that may or may not have been familiar to them; nevertheless, the context, pressures, and influences of distance learning were new.

I have organized the four school districts represented in this study based on the median income of households served by the district (United States Census Bureau n.d.) because the differences that I observed in the students' experience of their schooling were tied directly to socioeconomic factors, including the types of jobs that parents/guardians held (and thus their availability to help their students with school), the access to resources such as a stable internet connection and a distraction-free environment to learn, and the diversity of options they have for what to do in their free time. For convenience and anonymity, I have codenamed the districts A through D according to the descending socioeconomic status of the community. Unsurprisingly, school ratings, as reported by GreatSchools.org (n.d.) follow along this same descending classification. GreatSchools.org uses metrics obtained from the Department of Education to construct ratings based on "Test Scores," "Student Progress," "College Readiness," and "Equity." (GreatSchools.org. n.d.) The average of these scores makes up the "GreatSchools Summary Rating" on a scale from one to ten, and I have included averages of these ratings for each district below. The list below also happens to be ascending for the percentage of the Latinx student population of the school district. From this point on, I will refer to the districts as follows:

**District A:** has an average GreatSchools Summary Rating of 8.0 and a median household income of \$119K.

**District B:** has an average GreatSchools Summary Rating of 6.0 and a median household income of \$65K.

**District C:** has an average GreatSchools Summary Rating of 5.3 and a median household income of \$64K.

**District D:** has an average GreatSchools Summary Rating of 4.4 and a median household income of \$62K.

### Limitations

The limitations of this study included the sample size (fourteen students) and the geographic relatedness of the students (all being part of Southern California school districts). Additionally, this was a relatively short study, lasting only one academic semester (about four months) and I was working part-time and taking classes online myself throughout the duration. Bearing this in mind, I endeavored to make the most of this report while resisting the impulse to stretch too little data too far to achieve coherence. Geertz (1973, 19) warned that "coherence cannot be the major test of validity for a cultural description...there is nothing so coherent as a paranoid's delusion or a swindler's story."

Unfortunately, doing ethnography during a global pandemic also means that most participant observation must occur online, which is not ideal for studying students attending school. Finally, three of the fourteen participants were members of my family.

### Finding a Foothold

When I began this study, I knew I would be looking at distance learning, but I was not sure what specifically I would be focusing on. Given how novel mass-scale distance learning was, issues were bound to arise. My purpose then was to identify if and how students were impacted by distance learning. Sara Delamont (2017) discussed three of the emergent themes that I observed as being historically of particular interest to educational researchers, namely "places and spaces," "time and timescapes," and "movement and mobilities." These themes take on new significance as they are defined and, in

some cases, completely redefined in the context of distance learning.

After my initial conversations with students, four themes quickly became apparent: time, agency, friendships, and space. These were the areas where students had the most to say and which I observed to inspire the most original thinking and consideration from students. Discussions around these topics were characterized by long pauses, hesitation, uncertainty, and questions— signs that students needed to work to make sense of them. I briefly elaborate on each of these before returning to the two thematic areas that this work focused on, time and agency.

### Time

Time is a principal component of the American grade school system. Everything in school—class, lunch, recess, breaks, etc.—happens on a schedule, and time awareness is reinforced repeatedly throughout the school day, traditionally through the ringing of the school bell. Students are obliged to abide by a schedule through the threat of disciplinary action and, aside from the few students who choose to “ditch” class, student actions are limited to classroom matters within the span of the class period. Based on Karp’s (1986) distinction, students are not agents in this context, but rather, *actors*:

The actor refers to a person engaged in action that is framed, as is all social action. An actor’s action is rule governed or oriented. The agent refers to persons engaged in the exercise of power in its primary sense of the “bringing about of effects,” that is, engaged in action that is constitutive. Agency implies the idea of “causal power” through which we realize the potential of the world (Karp 1986, 137).

I suggest that in the distance learning context, disparate, undefined, and difficult-to-regulate expectations relating to time enable some students to discover and exercise agency in ways that the rigidly structured nature of traditional, in-person schooling encumbers.

In my initial interview with a sixth-grade student from District C, I asked him to describe

what a typical day participating in distance learning was like hour-by-hour, as well as what a typical day at in-person school the year prior had been like. I had no doubt that students’ days at home looked different than they did when they were in school, but it was not until hearing his descriptions that I realized just how drastic these differences were. In Table 1 below, I have listed some of the events common to both settings and the times at which they occur to highlight the major differences. The student explicitly listed the concrete times, like school start and end, and the others were coded based on cues in the breakdown of his day.

As part of their transition online, many Southern California schools employed a two-shift system where half the students attend virtual class in the morning and the other half attend in the afternoon. However, this two-shift system was not the case for the student whose schedule is illustrated in table 1. Ultimately, these values were consistent with the student’s estimate when asked directly, and my calculation after re-examining what he reported in his hour-by-hour breakdown. This is the typical daily schedule of just one student, but the reason I chose to highlight it here is that, based on all the students I observed and interviewed, this student’s schedule represents the most median situation across all variables: school district, relative socioeconomic status, parental intervention, and time spent on technology. I interviewed students in both high and low socioeconomic groups (A and D), and, in my sample, most of the students’ situations were like this one.

### Agency

I was observing an after-school tutoring program (gone virtual) serving six fourth graders from District D when the coordinator of the Zoom meeting, the tutor, asked the students if they had finished their homework. After confirming that they had, the tutor said that they would work on a Kahoot (an online group quiz) for extra math practice. One student then immediately exclaimed, “Nuh-uh! I am not doing that, bye!” before turning off her camera and muting herself. Later, I interviewed this student and asked her about the event. She said that her parents make her stay the entire duration of the tutoring session but that if it is

Activity	Time (in person)	Time (distance learning)
Wake up	6:30-7:00 a.m.	8-8:40 a.m.
"Arrive" at school	7:45-7:55 a.m.	8:43 a.m.
School start	8 a.m.	8:45 a.m.
School end	2:45 p.m.	11:00 a.m. (latest)
First YouTube video	5:30 p.m. (earliest)	5 p.m.
First video games played	5:30 p.m. (earliest)	5 p.m.
<b>Total spent on technology (not including class/homework)</b>	<b>3-4 hours</b>	<b>5-7 hours</b>

Figure 1: Student Schedule in person vs. distance learning

"boring," she will turn off her camera and watch YouTube, draw, or play *Roblox* (a popular phone game). I asked if they ever came in to check on her and see this, and she said they do not. From further observations, I noted that this behavior is regular, including among other students, and that indeed, her parents, and the parents of other students, do not check on them during these sessions. In addition, these agentic outbursts were contagious—students whom I had never observed behave this way would eventually behave similarly if the circumstances became disagreeable enough. I noted that the coordinator has very few tools for dealing with this and instead must try to creatively prevent it, or simply accept it. Consider the equivalent of this behavior in an in-person setting (if an equivalent exists) and the disciplinary action that may be associated with it. Over the course of my research, I observed that agentic expressions like this one are regular occurrences even during proper class time in front of a student's actual teachers.

I propose that student agency is closely tied to two key aspects of this new context: first, the glimpse that distance learning gave students into the inner-workings of education, particularly, the fragility of this once unchanging aspect of their daily lives; and second, the increased amount of time ("free"

and otherwise, real and imagined) some students were afforded by being home all day, including, in some cases, the freedom to complete their schoolwork on their schedule and terms.

### Friendships

One of the topics that students brought up consistently was their friends. It comes as no surprise that students miss seeing their friends during distance learning, but I observed extensions of this theme which caught my attention. Few parents of the students with whom I spoke were defying county recommendations and allowing their children to congregate in-person with their friends (though this was usually not the case for meeting with family members). However, the students who were allowed to spend time in-person with their friends were most often from higher socioeconomic status families. Apart from this, I observed that all communication students were having with their friends was mediated by social media applications like Zoom, Google Meet, Discord, Google Hangouts, Instagram and through video games with chat functions such as *Roblox* and *Minecraft*. Thus, in these distance learning contexts, data is being harvested from students' communication with their peers and, subject to the terms of use of the platform, may be used for the purposes

of building their “data doubles”: digital second selves, built from mined data and surveillance, that are “increasingly the objects toward which governmental and marketing practices are directed” (Haggerty and Ericson 2000, 613). Although I chose not to pursue this further in this investigation, more research is necessary to discover the implications of children communicating within these conditions.

In some cases, for example that of a sixth-grade student from District C whose classes were held using Canvas Conference (a video conferencing program specifically designed for classes), students were able to send chat messages during class directly to individual students, but teachers were able to see and monitor these chats. The student became aware of this because the teacher would often verbally make comments about them chatting or even enter the chat conversation (in one instance, interrupting a conversation about playing Xbox after class to say, “don’t go to your Xbox after school, do all your work!”) The student laughed as he told me this and said that now he talks to his friends on Discord (a chatting platform geared towards the gaming community).

In contrast to online distance learning, under normal circumstances, students had at least one, and at most, three hours of unmediated, unmonitored, non-archived, face-to-face interaction time with their friends and peers when attending school in-person. Could there be negative effects associated with denying children privacy in these quotidian contexts where it was never of concern before? What could the implications of students’ data being collected from such a young age be?

## Space

The spaces that students used to know as simply their bedrooms, kitchens, and dining rooms have been redefined as spaces for schooling. One student I spoke to attends class on the same desk his PlayStation and TV are on. Another student attends school from her living room couch. Are these repurposed spaces impacting students’ ability to succeed? The teacher of a first grader in District A would ask parents at the beginning of every class to move any distracting objects that students might feel tempted to play with out of reach. The same

school district sent an email to parents requesting that students do not use spinning chairs at their desks because, as you can imagine, virtual teachers were having trouble stopping children once they got spinning. Research in this area is needed to explore the impacts of these new, hybrid learning spaces.

## Agency and Schooling

Scholarship about children’s agency reveals that the task of defining agency is not straightforward and demands its own theoretical dissection (Abebe 2019; Sirkko et al. 2019; Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie 2006). Ahearn (2001, 130), further complicates the matter with their admonition that “for anthropologists in particular, it is important to avoid treating agency as a synonym for free will or resistance.” Ahearn (2001, 112) elaborates that “all action is socioculturally mediated, both in its production and in its interpretation;” we do not act in a vacuum. Culture and the world around us influence the way we think, what we believe, and as a result, the possible actions that are available to us (Ahearn 2001, 114). Agency, therefore, as Ahearn (2001, 112) defines it, is “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act.”

Hammersley (2016, 119) issues a warning like Ahearn’s (2001)—but specific to children—about the danger of dichotomizing agency: “simply opposing a passive model of children to one where they are wholly unconstrained or undetermined in their behaviour, and therefore can exercise autonomous will...children, like adults, must be seen as active in some respects and to some extent but not in any absolute sense.” On top of this, Abebe (2019, 8) suggests conceiving of children’s agency as “interdependent”, which is to say that it is always situated in contexts and relationships, and as a “continuum” in flux, “negotiated continuously between children and families and communities as they navigate tensions between personal and collective interests.” These theoretical considerations informed how I understood and utilized agency conceptually in this research. In addition, I have chosen to refrain from quantifying agency and talking of “more” or “less” agency: “agency is not a quantity that can be measured.” (Ahearn 2001,

122) They continue, “researchers should focus on delineating different kinds of agency, or different ways in which agency is socioculturally mediated in particular times and places.” (Ahearn 2001, 122) Furthermore, it may be possible to emphasize actorhood over agency when discussing students attending in-person school, but this does not void or make the discussion of agency less important. Distance learning produces differential terms and settings for the negotiation of student agency, and the traditional channels of power are challenged as teachers and administrators are bounded by the screen.

Practice theory and the idea of habitus aid in the conceptual leap from simple free will or autonomy to a more nuanced and context-dependent understanding of children’s agency. Practice theories are theories of action that emphasize the entanglement of human action and structures of society and culture, they help us understand how “persons and human activity can be constituted through the social process, while at the same time society and history can be constituted through meaningful human activity.” (Ortner 1989, 11) Habitus is the process which generates dispositions that acknowledge societal structures and constraints; these are not only encoded into our common sense, but are embodied and play out in each situation as we navigate our lives, thus ultimately reproducing the structures and constraints (Bourdieu 1977, 78; Ahearn 2001, 117; Brown, Tubelle, and Mcilwraith 2017, 311). In social theory, habitus is closely related to inequality and power imbalance. Habitus results in ways of being in the world that reinforce our “place in society” and which tacitly consent to our domination.

For example, when most students enter a classroom, they immediately sit at a desk—and sit in a particular way—rather than sitting, say, on the floor. This results in a classroom where all students are sitting in desks, feet on the ground, facing the front of the room. When another student walks in, what will they do? And when it is time for the teacher to plan or enforce classroom etiquette, how will they conceptualize the way students should be in the classroom? All student behaviors are subject to this process: how they enter the school, what rooms they freely walk in to, when they speak in

a classroom, and where they go at recess are the result of, and reason behind, habitus. In-person schooling thus provides the generative circumstances for the habitus of the physical school, rather than schooling more broadly. However, the habitus may generate different possibilities, if, for example, the generative circumstances change abruptly. When we divorce education from in-person school, a merging and reconfiguration occur between the habitus of the school and the habitus of the home. And when gray areas inevitably emerge, authority from parents/guardians may contain major schisms, but what happens in the absence of that authority? I suggest that in these cases, agentic students are filling the gaps.

The “Paradox of Pedagogy,” as expounded by Kant (1803), illuminates the antithetical forces acting within pedagogical settings: encouraging students to exercise their freewill while obliging them to follow the rules. Kant (1803, 27, my emphasis) adds, “[the student] should be made to feel very early *the inevitable opposition of society*, that he may learn how difficult it is to support himself, to endure privation, and to acquire those things which are necessary to make him independent.” In mentioning “the inevitable opposition of society,” Kant nods to the conditions out of which agency arises. Feeling the opposition is the beginning of the negotiation that is agency. The paradox of pedagogy is clearly visible in the highly organized and structured, face-to-face classroom setting where the stakes are high, and punishment feels like a real possibility. Considering the ways in which it limits movement, for example, precluding the ability to leave the classroom or school grounds as one pleases (students cannot close the laptop lid on school in person), the habitus that the physical school institution generates results in a tightly bounded version of student agency. What I would like to invite the consideration of is how detaching education from this context affects agentic possibilities for students and their awareness of them. This research specifically looks at how agency differs for students from different socioeconomic circumstances, which I identified in my fieldwork as the determining factor of the degree to which parents/guardians can recreate

school at-home so that it results in agentive possibilities not too dissimilar from those generated by in-person school. Ultimately then, during distance learning, the “school at home” becomes yet another site for the production of inequality as the conditions for the habitus that is most suitable to academic success are maintained by the parents/guardians of children privileged enough to have them around (Khan 2021, 16).

## Two Critical Aspects of the Transition to Online Distance Learning

Based on my observations, two unique aspects of the transition to online learning have had the greatest influence on student’s sense of agency:

1. Students have witnessed what was previously a taken-for-granted and static element of their lives, education, be deconstructed and have subsequently been a part of the reconstruction process through which they have seen a sneak-peek of its inner-workings.
2. Student’s roles have been redefined as part of this reconstruction which in some cases has demanded of them a new sense of responsibility for their education, a greater awareness of time, and an understanding of, and reliance on, technology.

### The Fragility of Education

Intermittent stay-at-home orders forced public education to go virtual nationwide, and students had front-row seats to this process. The exact dates vary, but for most of the country (including Districts A-D), sometime around March 2020, students were told that they would not be attending school the following week and that “temporary arrangements” were being devised so that they could continue their education from home. Students witnessed the struggle to produce Chromebook laptops; in some districts, including District A, every student had one before the school closed. In others, such as District D, students did not receive a Chromebook before the end of the school year. After that, students waited for their teachers to undergo training on how to use necessary online resources (like Canvas, Google

Classroom, Zoom, etc.) to move their classes online. Many of them also saw parents/guardians scramble to put a space together for them to learn in. All this culminated in a shortened, sometimes chaotic, and, as Hart et al. (2019) suggests, potentially easier, stay-at-home version of school. Hart (2019, 8), who studied distance learning in Florida high schools, found “positive effects on passing the contemporaneous course but negative effects on subsequent course performance [and] graduation proxy” for first-time, virtual course takers. The sum of these experiences may have negatively affected students, particularly those who were already only partially committed to their education or who, as I heard from a student in District D, only attend school “because they have to.”

### Students' New Roles

As a result of the chaotic reconstruction of schooling chronicled above, student roles have been redefined and, in some cases, this has entailed a host of new responsibilities.

As a second-grade boy from District B was breaking down his day for me, I could not help but notice how specific he was in detailing the times at which events occurred and their durations: “12:01 to 12:03,” “seven to eight minutes,” “around 2:19.” I asked him if he checks the time often, to which he replied, “Oh yeah, a lot.” He said that he is constantly checking the time on his computer’s taskbar and on his tablet’s home screen, and when he is bored in class he said, he will just watch it. He shared that if his teacher misses the time, (for break for example), he becomes anxious and repeats to himself, “Come on...Say it, say it!” I asked if he had ever thought about time before when he was at school in-person. He paused for a moment. He told me that the only time he ever thought about it was when he was in afterschool care, and it was nearing 6 p.m., which meant that his mom might be late to pick him up. Besides that, he said that his dad would wake him up for school, feed him breakfast and drop him off, and then the bell would go off. And for every subsequent time-bound event during his school day, a bell would go off. I asked, “What would happen now if you did not look at the clock?” and he (an eight-year-old) responded:



If I didn't look at the clock then I definitely know that ...If I don't get anything on time, then my homework assignments wouldn't be assigned [turned in] when they're supposed to be, and I'd get my computer suspended, and I could get bad grades, and I'd just be really messed up.

This abrupt necessity for young students to familiarize themselves with time is stressful and unnatural, specifically for this student: "In young children (6-8 years), the concept of time is closely related with family and leisure time (play)" (Michel, Harb, and Hidalgo 2012, 40). In addition,

Even though they learn how to read a clock, to tell time, during their early school years, it takes [children] a long time to learn to translate their experience into standardized time units...These are the sort of temporal tasks children struggle with and for which they will need support from parents and teachers for many years. (Forman 2015, 2)

This student was not the only one to demonstrate a hyper-awareness of time. In fact, most students had quite a bit to say about time in our interviews, and while I was observing classrooms and after-school programs, there were invariably occasions when a student checked the time or made a comment about it. In one after-school tutoring session, a girl said to the tutor in a stressed tone, "Oh come on, it's already 5:54...We won't have time to play a game before it's over [at 6 p.m.]." This greater awareness of time, in relation to the new distance learning demands on students, was especially impactful for those primarily responsible for overseeing their class attendance and the completion of their assignments. This included those without a parent or sibling at home to remind them of responsibilities and is the first part of the equation that has influenced students' altered sense of agency.

### Balance

Along with a heightened awareness of time and, in the case of the students with minimal assistance or supervision during the day, the

added responsibility of managing their schoolwork, comes some necessity for *balance*. Balance, as I define it, is the ability to allocate the time at your disposal in a way that allows you to fulfill your responsibilities and still have time left for yourself. Balance is usually not something students have to think about until high school, if not college. Why is it then that I observed multiple elementary school students who were either staying up until 11 p.m. to finish a project due the next day, working on daily homework assignments until 9 p.m., or cramming multiple, backed-up assignments (the record for which goes to a first grader whom I observed with ninety-eight pending) the night before the teacher checks for completion?

### Technology

An understanding of technology is another prerequisite that distance learning created for students. I observed that a student's relationship with technology can either expand or limit agentive possibilities in the sense that understanding the capabilities and limitations of their technology, while not being an exhaustive understanding, was enough to allow them to position themselves more favorably in agentive negotiations. Meanwhile, not being able to grasp the basic functions of their Chromebook for example, may relegate students to the distance learning structure dominated by parents, teachers, and administrators. In the study, I found this to be one factor independent of socioeconomic status. While the students from District D may have had less access in general to different varieties of technology (smartphones, tablets, computers), they typically had more unsupervised time to play and experiment with what they did have. And even if the students from District A had more technology at home, their time on it may be more controlled and supervised.

An example of how the reliance on technology during distance learning factored into the agency equation was around the pressure to understand how to use technology well enough to efficiently complete school activities. I emphasize "efficiently" because the biggest obstacle I observed related to technology was surprisingly not how to connect

to a Zoom call or interpret a Google Classroom page, but rather a crippling unfamiliarity with the basic functions of a computer and site-specific tools (like the toolbar on Google Docs). I observed one fourth grader from District D who did *not* know how to move the cursor when typing (and, as a result, would 'backspace' an entire sentence or more just to capitalize a letter); did not know how to change the shape in the shape tool on a homework website and had to make lines and circles out of rectangles (which were quite impressive, notwithstanding how painstaking they were to create); and who did not know how to move and reshape text boxes and thus was forced to format his text with spaces (pressing the spacebar repeatedly). These minute details were the most painful for me to witness because they are basic struggles that can be addressed easily, but awareness of them is lacking. (Fortunately, ethnography is nuanced enough as a research method to identify issues like these.) His parents were out of the home during the day when he worked on assignments so even if they could help him work with the technology more efficiently, there may not have been an opportunity to.

On the other hand, many students were remarkably familiar with technology; they might have had a phone or have used a laptop prior to distance learning or simply learned very quickly. In any case, knowing how to use technology, being comfortable with it, and being able to manipulate it *feels good* and offers students some sense of power. This is especially true for students who realize their parent's or classmate's limitations as far as using and manipulating the same technology. This awakens students to an ability they have that is beyond their parent's and teacher's control. They familiarize themselves with and navigate these digital spaces from an early age, spaces that their parents and teachers might not even understand completely. I interviewed a sixth grader from District B who serves as a proxy between his parents and the internet. He orders items for them, books appointments, downloads files, orders food, and much more. He has become so familiar with his computer as a result of spending all day on it that he exudes a sense of pride during our conversation; I asked, "Is there anything you can't do on the computer?", to which he replied, "Probably not."

with a smirk. As demonstrated in these two examples, a student's confidence and sense of what is possible can be influenced by their relationship with technology. This "sense of what is possible", specifically, is a precursor to a student's positioning in agentive negotiations.

## The Socioeconomic Factor: Case Studies

During my investigation, I identified three distinct, generalizable (within the limited sample) cases circumscribed by one factor that defined the extent of the impacts on students' sense of time and agency: socioeconomic status. To be clear, I am referring here to median income of households served by the district, not necessarily the socioeconomic status of the student's household specifically (I did not elicit this data from students). In my sample, these three levels are clearly distinguishable, but given the small size of the sample, attempting to draw sweeping generalizations would be a mistake. I am including the descriptions and characteristics of these three cases because they were too distinct to ignore in my study, and while they can in no way serve as an end themselves, they may be able to contribute to further research.

I labeled these three socioeconomic distinctions upper-middle-, middle-, and working-class representing District A, B/C, and D, respectively. The most impactful dependent variable within each of the distinctions was parental involvement in the child's schooling. I gathered data about parental involvement both through interviews: asking how involved a student's parents are, how often they are home to help with homework, etc.; and through participant observation: observing whether a parent was present, whether anyone was checking-in on the student, and assessing how near someone who could help is while education is happening. What follows are three case studies corresponding to the three levels. I have only included the student's grade and gender to maintain their anonymity.

### Upper-Middle-Class Case Study

I engaged in participant observation with a boy in kindergarten from District A who has a second-grade sister learning from home as well. I sat beside the student throughout an entire

class session (about two hours). This student's parents hold jobs which allow one of them to be always home. Several qualities that I observed about the environment suggest that education is held in high regard in the household: the cleanliness and organization of the students' desk areas, the strict schedules that they adhere to, and the parent's insistence that they focus during class. I noticed that the parent had already turned on the student's laptop and set-aside the worksheets that the student would need for the day as well as the other necessary materials. The student was in his seat minutes before class started, and throughout the entire class time, the parent was either seated next to, or within earshot of, the student. When break time came around (which the parent was prepared for), they engaged the student as soon as it began and got him working on homework. At one point, when the teacher was giving instructions, the student either did not understand or got distracted, but he was able to turn to his parent and have the instructions clarified at once. At the end of class, no time was wasted; he ate lunch and homework followed immediately after.

Of particular interest here is that the student in this context's daily routine is not too unlike a regular school day: they are awoken by their parents at the same time each day, fed breakfast, and they always have a supervisor and timekeeper present with them. I never observed this student check the time, stress over a lack of balance, or struggle with technology. As such, the elements of new student roles which I laid-out in the previous section and described as having an impact on their sense of agency seem to either not apply at all or to apply only minimally to this student.

### Middle-Class Case Study

I was not able to sit with this student through class, but I did conduct three interviews with him over the course of the data collection period. This student was a second-grade boy from District B who has an older brother who was also learning from home. He explained to me that one of his parents must go out to work every day and the other works from home. During the school day, his parent is not available except at lunchtime, when they only

have a long-enough break to feed the student and his brother, not help with homework. The student explained to me that he is largely in charge of his schooling: he must join his classroom video call on time, identify and track his assignments, time his breaks and daily reading time (he says "Siri, set a timer..."), and be done with his homework by the time his parent is done working if he hopes to play video games. The student told me that if he has questions during the school day he has to try and ask his older brother (who is often busy or reluctant to help) or "figure it out on [his] own." This student admitted to obsessing over time, "daydreaming," and staying up late to finish homework. He explained that he was having a harder time with his schoolwork than he did when he was at school in-person. He also shared that he is comfortable using his computer (more so than his classmates) and that he has a tablet on which he plays games and watches YouTube in the morning before school and during breaks.

I have classified this student's situation as 'middle' because, of all the students I talked to, this situation or a slight variation of it was the most common. They have one or more parents/guardians working from home, and they may have a sibling also engaged in distance learning. These students have the autonomy to do as they please during the day seeing as they complete their schoolwork, and in general, they value school because they believe education is important. In this case, each element of student's new roles applies here: the student had to become familiar enough with clock-time to stick to a schedule on their own, the student sometimes struggles balancing schoolwork and leisure, and the student is confident in their abilities with technology which adds a layer of possibility to their actions. Instead of asking about his agency explicitly (which would have been tricky unless I had, for example, offered him a situational vignette—a method utilized by Gurdal and Sorbring (2018) in a study about student agency), I asked about his brother and whether they ever disagreed. He said that his brother often tries to "boss him around" when his parents are not present. I asked if he stood up for himself, and he said that he does. He said that sometimes he asks his brother for help with his homework and his brother says

that he cannot help because he is in the middle of a video game; he said that in these cases, he will yell at him “[brother] you need to help me because I have homework and you’re just playing video games!”

### Working-Class Case Study

I was able to observe a fourth-grade student from District D in several afterschool tutoring program sessions and was able to ask her questions regularly. Her parents work outside the home and are gone all day, though she has an older brother at home. The student explained that she and her brother are responsible for “going to school,” doing homework, and feeding themselves during the day. She said that she does her homework as quickly as she can so that she can play phone games like *Roblox* and *Among Us* and watch YouTube and TikTok. She told me that her parents do not raise any questions as to how she spends her time as long as her assignments are turned in. During the virtual afterschool program, she is one of the many students who will verbally object to the activities suggested by the coordinator and will turn her camera off to play when she is not interested. I asked her if she is obligated to attend afterschool tutoring or if not, why she does. She said that she joined to see her friends. This student’s familiarity with games and apps demonstrated that she was comfortable with technology. I asked the student if she felt that education was important, and she said she “has to do it.”

Based on my observations, this was the most extreme situation in terms of new agentic possibilities. The student already viewed her education as a means to an end—the barrier between her and video games or social media—and distance learning, as a result of the pandemic, served to further frame education as a fragile institution, susceptible to change and negotiation. Beyond that, the responsibilities that she had taken on by overseeing her education and her meals translated into agentic action in the context of the optional afterschool program, that is, making of the situation what she wanted—a hangout—and challenging the authority figure, whom she realizes, lacking the threat of coercion, has few options for re-making the situation.

## Conclusion

Mandatory distance learning implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic merged the home and the school, consolidated “free” time and “school” time, and in the process blurred the boundaries of student agency. The degree to which students experienced the agency-altering effects of distance learning was inversely proportional to their relative socioeconomic situation. Higher socioeconomic circumstances meant that parents/guardians were able to recreate ‘school-at-home’ such that student’s agentic possibilities were not too dissimilar from those generated by in-person school. Lower socioeconomic circumstances resulted in several new responsibilities for students, including the need to prematurely conceptualize time, practice time management, and learn to use and rely on technology. These responsibilities sometimes led to stress, imbalance, and obsessive behaviors. At the same time, they presented students with new agentic possibilities around their education that resulted in resistance, negotiation, and adapting educational contexts to meet their desires. The implications of this may be further educational disadvantages downstream and lower rates of educational success for students who were already at a disadvantage, thus ultimately perpetuating the reproduction of inequality. As others have noted (see Blume and Esquivel 2020; Esquivel et al. 2020), this is unfortunately a recurring theme: amidst new circumstances, the disadvantaged remain at a disadvantage. This discourse must continue if we hope to interrupt this cycle and move towards a situation where education can equitably serve all students.

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**“There’s no way I’m gonna meet their expectations:” Gender Role Attitudes and the Lived Experiences of Japanese Expatriates and Diaspora in the United States**  
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**ABSTRACT**

The persistent nature of patriarchal gender norms in Japan is well-known globally despite the nation’s commitment to achieving the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, one of which includes gender equality. This paper seeks to introduce and explore the personal narratives of Japanese expatriate women and youth diaspora in the United States to understand how they perceive gender roles in Japanese society and culture. Over the course of two months in 2021, bilingual open-ended interviews were conducted with ethnic Japanese expatriates and diaspora residing primarily in the Mid-Atlantic United States. Utilizing attitude development theories and existing research on cultural identity, this study provides a new look at the intersections between gender roles, migration, and what it means to accept—or reject—identity. New avenues of research are recommended to further discussions of gender norms, culture, and community by including the lived experiences of historically underrepresented populations.

**Keywords:** Gender role attitudes, diaspora, expatriates, Japanese-Americans

perspectives of my participants. I also provide historical context for the formation of gender norms in Japan, examine how gender roles influence women to emigrate from Japan, and confirm the absence of Japanese expatriate women and youth diaspora from studies examining gender role attitudes and cultural identity.

## Gender in Japanese Culture

Although current views on gender in Japanese culture have changed slightly since the government's endorsement of hegemonic gender norms in the Meiji Era, the foundational notions of femininity and masculinity have largely remained the same for the last several decades. Women have long been defined by the gendered cultural identity of *ryōsai kenbo*, 'good wife, wise mother,' which was "institutionalized as the official discursive model for women" in the late 1800s to early 1900s when the state encouraged Japanese women and girls to embody this role (Uno 1993; Dalton 2013, 28). While the official endorsement of 'good wife, wise mother' ended after World War II with the Allied Occupation of Japan and the subsequent removal of *ryōsai kenbo* doctrines from the education system's curriculum, women were still assumed to be mothers and wives, expected to stay within the confines of the home (Dalton 2013, 28). On the other hand, the period of unprecedented economic growth in Japan during the 1960s further solidified men's identity as both the *daikokubashira*, 'the central supporter of the household,' and the *shakaijin*, 'the "responsible, adult member of society"' (Uno 1993; Dasgupta 2005, 169). After World War II through to the 1970s, gender hegemony was further refined such that femininity could be identified by a woman's middle-class, full-time housewife status and masculinity was determined by a man's dedication to upholding the white-collar salaryman identity (Lee, Tufis, and Alwin 2010; Dalton 2013; Piotrowski et al. 2019).

Many scholars point to the building blocks of Japanese society—collectivism, conformity, and the patriarchal principles of Confucianism—to explain the persistent nature of these hegemonic gender ideals as well as the institution of the traditional *ie* system. Up until the end of World War II, the *ie* ('house' or

International movement has increased exponentially in recent years, aided by the rapid spread of globalization that has permeated nearly all industry and infrastructure. The United States has continuously remained one of the top destinations for immigrants all over the world, and for Japanese migrants in particular. Despite the long, complicated history between the two nations, the U.S. holds the largest share of Japanese nationals living abroad with 32 percent of 1.3 million Japanese migrants currently residing in the U.S.—nearly 25 percent of whom live in the Greater Los Angeles and New York Metropolitan Areas alone (Nippon.com 2022). Since 1996, when there were 764,000 Japanese nationals living overseas long-term (i.e., more than 3 months) or as permanent residents, millions more Japanese people left their country in pursuit of better job opportunities, to continue their education, to follow family members, or for a plethora of other economic, political, and social factors (Sakai 2002, 63; Izuhara and Shibata 2001).

In response to this widespread trend of migration and expatriation, the ways in which Japanese business professionals, academics, students, and their families process acculturation and cultural negotiation have been studied by several researchers. In fact, Fiske et al. (1998) noted that Japanese persons are the most studied ethnic group in cultural psychology (quoted in Sakamoto 2006, 561), though the Japanese diaspora is often left out of these studies. The purpose of this paper is to introduce and explore the gender role attitudes of Japanese women and youth diaspora in the United States. In conjunction with their personal narratives, theories of gender role attitudes and cultural identity development will be implemented to help explain the

'family') system served as the basis for patriarchal family structure and gender roles in Japan until it was officially abolished in the Post war Constitution (Sugihara and Katsurada 2002; Lee, Tufis, and Alwin 2010; Sano and Yasumoto 2013; Taniguchi and Kaufman 2014). Despite women's increased involvement in the labor force after World War II, their obligations to the household and to their husbands as *senjyō shufu* ('professional housewife') and *ryōsai kenbo* remain prominent characteristics of gendered cultural identity in contemporary Japanese society (Dasgupta 2005; Taniguchi and Kaufman 2014). This dichotomy of expectations is perhaps most clearly seen in the division of household labor between parents. Reports that compared the allocation of housework among high-income countries showed that Japanese men have consistently ranked at the bottom, averaging only 30 minutes per day on housework, childcare, and eldercare—less than 10 minutes of which are spent with their children—compared to women, who complete 27 hours of housework per week (North 2009, 25). It is clear that many women are unsatisfied with this gender norm: a multitude of surveys have indicated that Japanese women are more willing than ever to delay marriage and/or not have children, citing reasons such as a desire for economic independence and personal freedom, and, possibly, to avoid the double burden of expectations that come with being both a successful career woman and a housewife (Sugihara and Katsurada 2002; Nakano and Wagatsuma 2003; Dalton 2013).

## Japanese Women Overseas

Much of the existing literature on Japanese migrants examines business professionals or academics who "sojourn" overseas (within Asia or to Western countries) with their spouse and/or family to understand their reasons for migration and their experiences living in the host culture while maintaining their home culture values (Tang and Dion 1999; Izuhara and Shibata 2001; Sakai 2002; Thang, MacLachlan, and Goda 2002; Sakamoto 2006; Nukaga 2012). Few studies offer insights into expatriate or diaspora groups' experiences with migration and host culture interaction, and fewer still study perceptions of gender among older Japanese expatriates or youth diaspora.

One such study is Izuhara and Shibata's (2001) research on the circumstances and challenges of Japanese women growing older in British society. The authors found that the primary motivators prompting women to migrate were pressure from the Japanese social system to adhere to gender roles and family norms, and the women's desire to "maximize their well-being and enhance their life chances" (Izuhara and Shibata 2001, 584). In Britain, the women maintained their Japanese cultural values of uniformity but were not dictated by the same social standards that guided their education, marriage, and employment choices, and were thus enabled to view Japanese society through a fresh, critical lens.

Sakai's (2002) findings on Japanese women and men living in Britain are also significant to the discourse surrounding cultural identity and globalization. Sakai (2002) concluded that Japanese men typically migrate overseas for business where they are regarded as representative of all Japanese identities, and as such tend to regard their male Japanese-ness as a positive asset while Japanese women take advantage of their freedom from the oppressive gender hegemony when abroad to dismantle their identities and continuously build new ones.

## Development of Gender Role Attitudes

A prominent study in the field of cultural psychology and gender ideology is Takeuchi and Tsutsui's (2016) work on theories of gender role attitude development. The authors suggest two strategies for how gender role attitudes are formed and influenced: individual-level factors (divided into interest-based and exposure-based explanations) and societal-level factors (divided into cohort replacement and intra-cohort change explanations). The interest-based explanation posits that an individual will put their interests before their attitudes—that is, one will not support egalitarian gender role attitudes if it does not benefit them. The exposure-based explanation suggests that an individual's attitudes reflect their lived experiences and interactions with sociocultural norms, such as ideological influences from

parents, observations of parents' behavior, employment experiences, and "entrance into the traditionally gendered relationships of marriage and parenthood" (Takeuchi and Tsutsui 2016, 105). At the societal level, cohort replacement occurs over a long period of time in which younger generations hold innately egalitarian values that will likely persist throughout their life, eventually replacing the older generations' traditional attitudes. Intra-cohort change, on the other hand, is generated by social structural or institutional changes, such as women's increased participation in the workforce or economic recession, and can trigger an attitudinal change in adulthood.

## Methods

My research draws on a qualitative study involving bilingual interviews in English and Japanese conducted in March and April 2021 with people of Japanese heritage from both the United States and Japan. The study aimed to collect their beliefs, perspectives, and experiences regarding gender roles, gender discrimination, and living abroad, with a particular focus on the Japanese youth diaspora and expatriate women living in the U.S. Interview questions were designed in a way to encourage participants to talk at length about their personal experiences and opinions to the extent that they were willing and comfortable to share with me. The participants in this study are a sample of 11 individuals ranging from 22 to 63 years of age at the time of interview, of a middle-class socioeconomic background, with ethnic Japanese heritage, and experience living in Japan (i.e., they were raised in Japan, they studied abroad in Japan, and/or they regularly visit Japan).

Five interviewees—two men, two women, and one genderqueer person—were born between the years of 1996 to 1999, with ages ranging from 22 to 24 at the time of interview. This group of participants are of the Japanese diaspora in the U.S., all of whom have mixed Japanese heritage as biracial, multiracial, or multicultural individuals. Except for one participant who resides on the West Coast, all diaspora participants reside in the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic region.

Six interviewees, all Japanese women, were

born between the years of 1958 to 1973, with ages ranging from 47 to 63. Five of the interviewees are Japanese expatriates who currently live in the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic region, while one lives in Tokyo, Japan. Four of these six participants have studied abroad for a period of at least one to four years at a college or university in either Texas or Washington State. Three of those who studied abroad are now in an intercultural or interracial marriage and reside in the U.S.

All diaspora participants were raised in New Jersey, except for one who was raised in California and Hawai'i. The expatriate participants were raised in various parts of Japan, including Kumamoto, Shizuoka, Kagawa, and Tokyo Prefectures. Participants' places of heritage are scattered throughout Japan in the Kantō (western), Chūbu (central), Kansai (southern central), Shikoku (southwestern), and Kyūshū (southern) regions, with about half of all participants hailing from Tokyo Prefecture. The longest time these individuals have spent in Japan ranges from one month to 40 years, not including the one participant who currently lives in Japan. Six of the interviewees, all expatriates, grew up in Japan and spent their formative years there; three diaspora participants studied abroad in Japan between 2017 and 2020; and all interviewees visited Japan within the last four years, the majority of whom were last in Japan in 2019. Participants have been assigned pseudonyms by the author to maintain their anonymity. The views expressed by the participants should not be taken as being wholly representative of their generation, gender, ethnicity, or current beliefs. For a full list of the participants, see Table 1 below.

## Results

In this section, the participants' perceptions of gender roles and their gendered lived experiences in both the U.S. and Japan will be introduced. Through their narratives, we may begin to understand the relationship between gender role attitudes and intercultural experiences, as well as how gendered cultural identities can inform analyses of expatriate family dynamics and international movement.

Pseudonym	Birth Year	Gender (self-identified)	Diasporic Generation	Year of Immigration	Study Abroad Destination and Term
Satsuki	1958	woman	New first generation ( <i>Shin Issei</i> )	1992	—
Yoshie	1957	woman	New first generation ( <i>Shin Issei</i> )	2000	—
Nozomi	1963	woman	—	—	Texas, 1986-87
Kayano	1965	woman	New first generation ( <i>Shin Issei</i> )	1984	Texas, 1984-88
Yukari	1973	woman	New first generation ( <i>Shin Issei</i> )	2004	Washington, 1997-98
Kaede	1973	woman	New first generation ( <i>Shin Issei</i> )	2008	Washington, 1992-96
Aiden	1996	man	New second generation ( <i>Shin Nisei</i> )	—	—
Satoru	1996	man	New second generation ( <i>Shin Nisei</i> )	—	Tokyo, 2018-19
Rory	1998	genderqueer	New second generation ( <i>Shin Nisei</i> )	—	—
Selene	1998	woman	Fourth generation Japanese American ( <i>Yonsei</i> )	—	Tokyo, 2019
Kasumi	1999	woman	New second generation ( <i>Shin Nisei</i> )	—	Kyoto, 2019-20

Table 1: Participants and their backgrounds, ordered from oldest to youngest

### The Double Burden Dichotomy

Overall, expatriate participants described the expectations of Japanese men as being “outside” the home while the expectations of women are “inside.” Yukari believed her parents were a representative model of gender roles for most Japanese households, explaining that:

[They] were the stereotypical Japanese husband and wife. What I mean by

stereotypical is, the man supports the household by going to work...the father goes to work and earns money. And the mother stays at home, does housework, raises the kids, everything. Everything inside the house.

Nearly all participants in both interview groups gave the same answer when asked to describe their perception of gender roles in Japanese society; the words “rigid,” “limited,” and “old-

fashioned” were frequently used to characterize gendered expectations. Participants were also unanimous in their description of the gendered division of labor observed among their parents. Women were responsible for managing the household, such as cooking, cleaning, housekeeping, and child-rearing, while men contributed little to household affairs in order to work full-time and overtime hours at the office.

Participants in both groups used descriptors such as “tamed,” “obedient,” “quiet,” and “respectful” when asked about the qualities expected of women. Selene remarked that being a Japanese woman meant “being as dainty and as invisible as possible, but also being accessible to men when they want.” Participants also responded that being a Japanese woman is synonymous with motherhood and supporting roles, leaving little opportunity for upward mobility to hold executive positions.

Three expatriate participants provided personal anecdotes on experiencing misogyny in the workplace. Kaede, who worked in customer service and hospitality for 12 years in Japan, stated that she often experienced gender discrimination. She recalled a particular incident that took place in the mid-2000s in Tokyo when a female customer did not accept Kaede’s service because she was a woman and told Kaede’s female manager that women cannot become managers in Japan. After this experience, Kaede remembers thinking, “oh, I see, it’s not good to be a woman.” She believes that this mentality of internalized misogyny in both women and men in Japan is something that cannot be changed because it is ingrained in the societal mindset. Kaede also implied that sexist beliefs are not restricted to certain regions of Japan—such as the rural countryside where the patriarchal system remains firmly entrenched—nor limited to the typically conservative elderly, as she noted that the customer in this incident was a woman in her 30s residing in metropolitan Tokyo. Multiple expatriate participants mentioned the importance of the environment in shaping and influencing one’s thinking, suggesting that more progressive values are linked to urban areas whereas conservatism is associated with the

rural countryside. However, Kaede’s experience with discrimination in Tokyo highlights the patriarchal value system’s omnipresence regardless of where one was raised or where one currently lives.

Nozomi described her experience working at an accounting office in the early 1980s in Japan, recounting how only women staff would serve tea to all the employees and clean the office every morning, including both men’s and women’s bathrooms. She explicitly voiced her discontent to upper management about the unfair expectations of serving and cleaning, and questioned the purpose of these enforced gender roles. Although her boss informed her those were the responsibilities of new employees, Nozomi observed that when a new male employee was hired, he did not serve tea or clean the bathrooms as she did. Upon confrontation, her boss explained, “Well, he *is* a man.” Nozomi expressed that she “really felt discriminated against” at that moment. She also recalled working for a different Japanese company where her male manager would condescendingly refer to the women employees as “girls.” She remembers thinking, “isn’t there something wrong with that? [...] It’s unthinkable!” Although she was ambivalent about the existence of gender inequality in today’s society, Nozomi recognized the double burden of the gender roles that were forced on her. Unlike men, women are not only tasked with waged work but are also expected to quietly carry out “domestic” work in the office, such as serving, cleaning, and other similar duties.

Immediately after graduating from college in Japan, Satsuki moved to the U.S. to work in New York, then later returned to Tokyo in the 1980s where she worked at her first Japanese company. She remembers being surprised by the gendered division of labor in her office, similar to Nozomi’s workplace. Satsuki said she was particularly opposed to cleaning out ashtrays in the office because she does not smoke. She described the following exchange with her boss:

I said, “I’m not going to clean the ashtrays.” And I was told, “Oh, I see. It’s because you lived in America.” So they believe women don’t usually say this

kind of thing and that's why they had to find a reason for why I spoke up—"oh, because you're American."

Although Satsuki describes the inside of her mind as "completely Japanese," her speaking up and voicing disagreement was coded by her male superior as an intrinsically American, non-Japanese trait. The notion that defying gender roles is not compatible with being Japanese is reflected in many participants' remarks that abiding by gender roles is a "natural" part of the Japanese identity.

### Providing for a Family vs. Raising a Family

Both participant groups overwhelmingly responded that being a man in Japanese society means having a wife and children and embodying the roles of breadwinner, decision-maker, and leader of the household. Other answers included being a hard worker, engaging in physical labor, making personal sacrifices for the greater good of the family and/or their company, and not outwardly showing emotion.

Selene lived with a host family in Tokyo while studying abroad in 2019 and stated that she rarely saw her host father because he was always busy with work. She acknowledged that he supports the family by providing an income, but reflected, "What's the point in bringing home money if you don't know how to raise the family?" A few individuals in both participant groups stated that their own fathers were so consumed by work that they rarely saw or spent time with their fathers during their childhood.

The participants who observed the disappearance of their fathers from home and family life recognized the undesirability of this lifestyle for their future families and were thus motivated to reconstruct the gender roles they grew up with to increasingly prioritize gender equality and personal happiness. The participants mentioned making conscious efforts to encourage egalitarianism in their own homes by demonstrating to their children a more equal division of household responsibilities between the parents.

### To be Japanese, American, and Everything In-Between

Less than half of the participants offered positive outlooks for gender equality in Japan. Nozomi, who has lived in Japan for most of her life except for a brief time in Texas, repeatedly used the word *rafu* (lit. 'rough'), meaning casual or relaxed, to describe the current state of gender dynamics in Japan. A few expatriate participants compared the current state of gender equality to when they were last in Japan and remarked that although the situation has gotten better, there are still many sectors that can be improved, such as the labor force, media and entertainment, and in the home. One participant, Yoshie, mentioned the problematic comments made by Yoshiro Mori, the then-president of the 2022 Tokyo Olympics organizing committee, who suggested that women talk too much (Rich 2021), to illustrate that "that kind of thinking is deeply rooted" among older Japanese men. However, another participant, Kasumi, brought up Mori's comments to argue that it is a "typical mindset" even among younger men. She described a time when she was conversing with male Japanese peers while studying abroad in Kyoto and felt that the men were "put off" by her direct manner of speaking, which she labeled an American trait. Kasumi said, "There was this one guy who kept being like, *anta kowai*, 'you're scary,' and it was like, why, I'm just talking freely. I don't know, it felt sexist."

The majority of participants seemed to have pessimistic views about Japan's progress on gender equality. Two expatriate participants even declared that Japan may be incapable of changing its gender norms. Kaede said that change would be ideal but remarked:

No matter what, in the end—and this may be true for Asia—men are at the top. And it should change but I don't think it will. I always thought about leaving Japan and going abroad because of that.

Of Japanese society and the workforce, Satsuki believes, "it's not changing. Or it can't change. Even after decades pass, it's still...in people's minds there's no system like that." Kasumi was pleasantly surprised by the outcry in Japan over Mori's comments but seemed to remain skeptical about the potential for further action: "In my experience, I feel like a lot of Japanese

people our age don't really think that critically about what's happening politically." To make a case in point with Kasumi's statement, one young male participant, Aiden, said that he views Japan's gender roles as "old-fashioned" but was the only participant who was indifferent about gender roles because he felt it would not affect him whether egalitarianism was introduced or not. Another youth participant, Rory, stated matter-of-factly, "It's not equal at all." They observed that "Japan is very rooted, deep-rooted in their tradition" and believes it is a country incapable of accepting new or fluid gender roles.

One memory that stood out to Rory occurred when they were in Japan and a family member told them to be quiet. Rory countered the scolding by declaring, "I'm not Japanese, I'm American." Satoru made a similar statement when describing the pressure to raise a traditional, heteronormative, nuclear family. He remarked that he would have to make sacrifices to fulfill that expectation, but also acknowledged that "there's no way" he could meet his parents' expectations:

I'm still gonna appreciate and remember the history of the family, but [...] I'm not fully Japanese anymore. I'm gonna do my own thing, I'm gonna become more American. [...] I'm gonna take my children's happiness and development over trying to be this example of what a Japanese man should be.

### Breaking the Cycle of Misogyny

Every participant responded that their views on gender roles are different from their parents' generations. Kayano believes that, in her parents' era, "it was so natural that women follow men," though she observed gender equality has improved since then. She also claimed that she is personally satisfied with the current state of gender dynamics in Japan but wishes for increased gender equality for young people. Another participant, Yukari, declared, "If I were asked if I could do the same thing as my mother, I can't do that, I don't want to. That's why I definitely didn't want to marry someone like my father."

Kaede gave a particularly striking anecdote in her answer: "My [way of] thinking, my parents

say they can't believe it. They always ask me, 'Why do you think like that?'" She remarked that her 80-year-old father has never cooked, washed dishes, done laundry, or even filled a bathtub with water before because those tasks were coded as "wifely duties." Kaede explained that since her hometown is in the countryside, "that kind of thinking is really strong." She left Japan immediately after graduating high school to attend university abroad as she did not want to stay in Japan and follow the norms expected of women. Kaede initially had no desire to even get married after observing the relationships of her parents and grandparents, believing that "I thought it would be impossible for me." She mentioned how her younger sister strongly agrees with their parents' views and embodied the traditional norms expected of her, "But that turned out to be a lot of stress for her, she said it was too much." Even now, Kaede says she cannot stay in her hometown for more than two weeks because she becomes frustrated by the stark differences in gender role attitudes. Kaede's family also express confusion with her support for egalitarianism:

That's why my mom and sister say to me, "You're strange. Why are you so selfish?" My friends say that too. [That's why] I think it won't change. [...] Women do everything inside of the house. Men go outside and work and earn money. This is fundamental, that's the base.

## Discussion

Overall, the results of this study were largely in alignment with the findings of similar studies which collected perceptions of gender roles from Japanese individuals, insofar that interviewees in my study and others experienced conflict—whether interpersonal or within the self—as a consequence of the pressures of gender norms in Japanese society (Nakano and Wagatsuma 2003; Sakamoto 2006; Belarmino and Roberts 2019).

Using Takeuchi and Tsutsui's (2016) individual and societal theories of attitudinal change, we can better understand the expatriate and diaspora participants' gender role attitudes in relation to their personal experiences. The individual-level, exposure-based theory explains that attitudes are



influenced by events that happen to or near individuals—including the influence of parents' ideology and their behavior, level of education, and work experiences—with the implication that encounters with misogyny are reflected in their opposition to traditional gender roles (Takeuchi and Tsutsui 2016, 105). For example, the culmination of Kaede's observations of her parents' relationship, her experience with sexism in her workplace, and her time abroad in the U.S. are reflected in her staunch position against patriarchal customs. Those who have had limited exposure to values outside the system they grew up with, however, tend to hold more conservative beliefs, such as Kaede's friends and family in Japan. Meanwhile, the societal-level cohort replacement theory helps explain how the youth diaspora's positive attitude toward dismantling gender roles is replacing the older cohort's traditionalism as they have yet to be initiated into the gendered institutions of marriage and parenthood, and hold "intrinsically egalitarian values [...] acquired during childhood" (Takeuchi and Tsutsui 2015, 105).

The diaspora participants' cognizance of and disagreement with the gendered Japanese cultural identity (i.e. women as obedient housewives, men as stoic breadwinners), along with the expatriate women's value change towards egalitarianism, support Nakano and Wagatsuma's (2003) research on the complex methods of social change through family relationships and generational conflict. They determined that change can occur in a multitude of ways, such as the youth making different decisions than their parents; the youth making the same decisions as their parents but in different historical contexts; the older generation reenacting the past; and the older generation shedding their old values to adopt new ones (Nakano and Wagatsuma 2003, 150). The recent shift towards gender egalitarianism was achieved through a combination of those methods that were negotiated between generations, as well as increased private and public discourse on individual agency that "made new forms of action thinkable, and therefore possible" (Nakano and Wagatsuma 2003, 146). As presented in my interviews with the older expatriate women, they are adopting new values by actively choosing and exercising

egalitarianism in their marriage and parental practices, while the youth diaspora is pushing against traditional concepts of family dynamics by negotiating gender norms with their parents and practicing self-agency.

The participants' responses also highlight the ways in which one's reluctance to follow established gender norms can affect patterns of migration and their sense of belonging to the Japanese cultural identity. Gender role attitudes can exert influence over one's decision to migrate and can also determine the likelihood of a migrant becoming an expatriate. Whereas remaining in Japan, for example, seems to only offer a "pre-determined path in life" for women in particular, migration and expatriation give women a chance to form their own lifestyle and critique their home culture's social norms from an outside perspective (Izuhara and Shibata 2001, 578). Paired with Takeuchi and Tsutsui's (2016) exposure-based theory, we can therefore conclude that exposure to the American value system and development of negative perceptions of Japanese social norms prompted interviewees Kaede, Yukari, Kayano, and Satsuki to not only consider going to the U.S., but to stay in the U.S. Their narratives support Sakai's (2002) research on Japanese women in Britain and their tendency to view Western countries as "a land of new opportunities" where a perceived freedom from hegemony gives them the opportunity to "reevaluate and adopt different identities" other than or separate from their Japanese selves (69-71).

As illustrated by the majority of the expatriate women and a few of the diaspora participants, the pressure to abide by Japan's gendered cultural identities was a contributing factor in both their desire to leave Japan and to remain in the U.S. Nukaga's (2012) study of Japanese migrant and expatriate mothers suggested that these women inhabit dual identities constructed from the values of their home and host cultures that hold, at times, conflicting ideologies of gender and parenthood (68-69). Lee, Tufis, and Alwin (2010) similarly wrote about the cognitive dissonance that arises from the "juxtaposition of beliefs" about gender roles and egalitarianism, or the "dual consciousness" experienced by some of the Japanese population (198). In conjunction with

Sakamoto's (2006) study of Japanese expatriates in the Midwestern U.S., the expatriates and diaspora I interviewed regarded their American and Japanese selves as inhabiting separate spheres of life: the 'American' self is brought forth in professional environments or when one needs to be assertive, while the 'Japanese' self is allocated for more casual, interpersonal situations (569-572). This "dual" concept was a common thread between identity-related narratives introduced by expatriate participants Kaede and Satsuki and diaspora participants Rory and Satoru, who shared the belief that to identify as Japanese meant endorsing traditional patriarchal views, and that to identify as American meant supporting egalitarianism.

Echoing Satsuki's experience nearly 40 years ago of being told she is American because she did not conform to the normative role of a Japanese woman (with no option of inhabiting both identities nor between them), the youth Japanese diaspora seemed to operate with a similar logic that progressiveness indicated not belonging to the Japanese cultural identity, but rather belonging to the American cultural identity. Interestingly, the notion that existing between these identities or existing within both in a way that was not mutually exclusive of each other was not mentioned by participants. Cognitive dissonance arising from a dilemma of identity (whether cultural, gender, or both) rooted in gender role attitudes was another unexpected outcome of these interviews. To build upon the concept introduced by Lee, Tufis, and Alwin (2010) and Nukaga (2012) of dual consciousness/identities, widening the scope of future studies to include the lived experiences of diaspora and individuals across the gender and sexuality spectrum will undoubtedly expand the parameters of the dual identity model.

## Limitations

This study intended to introduce the gender role attitudes of Japanese expatriate women and youth Japanese diaspora in the United States. However, I acknowledge that there are limitations in this particular study's methods and participants. First, all but two participants resided in the Mid-Atlantic region at the time of

interview. Involving people of Japanese heritage residing on the West Coast, where there are larger Japanese ethnic enclaves, and in the South and Midwest, where Japanese communities are fewer in number, can deepen our understanding of generational and geopolitical perceptions of gender. Second, this research was demographically limited in its participant pool. Various socioeconomic statuses, multiracial and multiethnic individuals, (dis)ability, and those who identify outside of the gender binary should be included to provide a clearer representation of the lived experiences of historically marginalized groups. Expanding the reach of this study to other countries where there are sizable populations of Japanese immigrants, expatriates, and diaspora is also recommended for further analysis of a settlement area's impact on gender ideology and identity development. Though an often-overlooked community, the diaspora in this study brought great depth to the research topic, and it is expected that their contribution will inspire similar models of participant diversity in future research.

## Conclusion

Scholars have pointed to the expansive Confucian moral system ingrained in Japanese society as a contributing factor for why Japanese people, particularly the older population, may not regard individualistic values, like leadership and assertiveness, as highly as traditional Japanese values, such as conformity and obedience (Rindfuss, Liao, and Tsuya 1992; Sugihara and Katsurada 2002; Lee, Tufis, and Alwin 2010; Takeuchi and Tsutsui 2016). Following these trends in research, I assumed that the older expatriate participants in my study would hold more conventional views on gender roles, while the younger diaspora was conversely expected to skew towards more progressive beliefs. However, the interviews indicated otherwise: the older generation was mostly on par with the younger participants' egalitarian beliefs, and was, in some instances, more critical of gender roles than the younger generation. This further supports Lee, Tufis, and Alwin's (2010) findings that progressive views on gendered labor are not solely a product of industry and age, but rather a result of individuals responding to their

social-institutional and economic surroundings.

The relationship between gender role attitudes, dual consciousness/identity, and migration should be further explored to answer the following questions: How does dual identity differ among expatriate, diaspora, and other immigrant populations? How can one identify as Japanese but voice discontent with such an inexplicable part of its societal norms? Can egalitarian values coexist with the Japanese cultural identity if they are perceived as two inherently contradicting concepts? Although these issues cannot be satisfactorily explored with the limited scope and sample size of this paper, these questions should be considered in future research concerning diasporic identity, migration, and gender role attitudes.

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