

## **Me, my child and Covid-19: parents' reflections on their child's experiences of lockdown in the UK and China**

### **Abstract**

Over the past two years, the world has been living through the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic. Children have had to adapt to online classrooms and lessons of some sort, and many parents have been forced to work from home whilst supervising their child's home learning activities. We used participatory visual methods to understand how children and their parents have coped during this time, engaging parents as co-researchers to ask their child to photograph and/or draw pictures that represent their daily lived experiences over the lockdown period. We then asked parents to interview their children (24 in total, 13 in the UK and 11 in China) using children's artwork as prompts, and finally we interviewed parents. Through the data collection process, parents captured their children's experiences and feelings since the coronavirus struck. The data was analysed using Foucault's theory of discourse to provide unique and comparative insights into children's experiences in the UK and China during this exceptional time. Ours is the first study to integrate parents' and children's views of Covid-19, drawing on parents as co-researchers. We argue here that the combination of the data collection methods used and drawing on parents as co-researchers enabled parents to gain insights into an understanding of their child's lived experiences throughout the pandemic that might otherwise have been unknown. These insights were often unexpected for parents, and have been grouped around themes of parental relief, anxiety and understanding.

**Keywords:** Parents, children, Participatory Visual Methods, Covid-19, UK, China

### **Introduction**

Over the past two years, the world has been living through the unprecedented Covid-19 pandemic. The effects have rippled across the global north and south, requiring draconian lockdown measures that have included school and workplace closures to prevent the spread of the highly contagious virus. Very few places and spaces have been spared the full effects of the pandemic, and daily life for many across the globe has been turned upside down. It has been a truly exceptional phase for children and young adults in their lives. As nurseries, schools, colleges and universities closed, learning switched to online and for many, took place at home. Children have had to adapt to online classrooms and lessons of some sort, and many parents have been forced to work from home, whilst supervising their child's home learning activities. Research indicates that there were differences

between lockdowns, with the first being more relaxed and novel in many countries, whilst subsequent lockdowns have been described as more psychologically gruelling for parents and children (Prime, Wade and Browne, 2020).

But whilst the broader context framing the impact of Covid-19 on daily life has similarities, national contexts have been experienced quite differently. Different countries have placed different emphasis on their Covid-19 health and safety messaging, ranging from a liberal, choice led approach to vaccination and testing, marked by a ‘personal responsibility’ discourse in the UK, to a narrow, limited option led approach in China, marked by a ‘defeating the virus’ discourse. Whilst the framing of these discourses is generalised, and both have strengths and limitations in their application, our interest in this paper is parents’ reflections on the effects of these dominant discourses on their child throughout the pandemic thus far. In employing child-centred research tools we hoped to provide a snapshot to parents, to better inform their understanding of their child’s experiences. The research question guiding this paper is ‘How have the data collection methods used in the project enabled parents to better understand their child’s experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic through participation in the research activities for the project?’

In addressing this question, our data provides unique insights into parents’ reflections on their child’s lived experiences of the pandemic through engaging children in an artwork creation and subsequent conversations. We argue here that the combination of the data collection methods used was key to enabling parents to gain insights into and understanding of their child’s lived experiences throughout the pandemic. These insights were often unexpected by parents, and have been grouped around themes of parental relief, anxiety and understanding. We note that relief was the most commonly referenced theme, despite the different discourses evoked by parents. By participating in the study, parents were provided with the opportunity to check in with their child, giving some a sense of relief that their child is coping despite the lockdowns and ongoing periods of home learning. This study serves as a pilot to examine the strengths and challenges of engaging parents as co-researchers to explore children’s voices in different cultural contexts. The English and Chinese parents’ reflections have enabled us to gain valuable knowledge for scaling up such data collection methods in future research. This paper adds to our understanding of the pandemic as it is the first study to integrate parents’ and children’s views of Covid-19 to provide insights into their unique experiences during this exceptional time.

The paper begins with a discussion of the background context framing the data collection. Next, we outline the research methodology and methods deployed along with a discussion of our theoretical

framework. We then move into the three data themes covered in this paper: parental relief, anxiety and understanding.

## **Background Context**

### ***The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on family life***

The Covid-19 pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented global crisis of care and learning. During this time, parents' anxiety and depressive symptoms were related to the increased stress they experienced during periods of lockdown (Brown *et al.*, 2020). Moreover, self-reported lower-quality parenting resulted from unmet childcare needs and family relationship distress (Roos *et al.*, 2021). In a similar vein, in a quantitative study, Morelli *et al.* (2020) found that parenting self-efficacy played a significant role in mediating the relationship between parenting distress and children's emotional well-being. In this regard, children's emotional well-being is the result of being exposed to a low level of parents' psychological stress, but it is also the fact that parents feel able to perform their parental role and manage the related tasks. Morelli *et al.* (2020: 7) further contend that 'self-confident parents can successfully activate many personal resources that seem to prevent their children's emotional dysregulation, even in emergencies such as the pandemic that increased their levels of psychological distress'. Parents must believe that they can protect their children from the coronavirus and promote positive emotional functioning for their children (Morelli *et al.*, 2020). These studies suggest that parents need to be supported to improve their ability to organise their children's daily routines during the quarantine and communicate with them about what is happening (Achterberg *et al.*, 2021; Liu *et al.*, 2021).

Parental understanding of children's experiences of Covid-19 provides a significant opportunity to explore how children have experienced the pandemic and its impact on their social and emotional well-being. Mantovani *et al.* (2021) investigated Italian children's experiences of Covid-19 lockdown by accessing parents' perspectives on their children's everyday lives, focusing on daily routines, emotional states, and online learning experiences. The parents reported a moderate level of confidence in coping with this health emergency and some improvements in parent/child and sibling relationships, children's adaptiveness, and autonomy. Some parents have experienced a greater sense of isolation and anxiety. In mainland China, Wu *et al.* (2021) examined the effect of lockdown on anxiety symptoms among parents in Wuhan during the first week of the Covid outbreak. It was discovered that parents who witnessed the lockdown had a higher stress level than those who did not. The authors argued that the harsh living conditions and lack of social support further intensified the parents' feelings of loneliness and fear. Similarly, Lee *et al.* (2021) surveyed American parents of 0–

12-year-old children and found that parents' perceived social isolation exacerbated their feelings of anxiety, which increased the risk of child maltreatment.

Although the pandemic raised young people's concerns regarding their health and well-being, the lockdowns enabled them to spend more time with their parents and siblings and thus enhance the family bond. For instance, a qualitative comparative study on Turkish and Chinese parents' experiences with their 3–6-year-old children during Covid-19 revealed that parent-child relationships were further enhanced after quarantine (Toran *et al.*, 2021). Tambling *et al.* (2021) further analysed parent-reported conversations with children about topics related to Covid-19. They found that high-quality parent-child relations were associated with strong levels of post-traumatic coping in children. However, it is not always the case. For instance, a US-based qualitative study with parents that explored family relationships during the early weeks of the pandemic found that parent-child relationships did not drastically change. However, early and middle adulthood parents reported quality time with children as busy schedules slowed or stopped (Vaterlaus *et al.*, 2021). This finding is in line with Prime *et al.*'s (2020) argument that 'the effects of extended isolation and home confinement inherent to the Covid-19 crisis are causing profound changes to family routines and rituals that are often taken for granted' (p.634). Set against this mixed picture of different experiences of Covid-19 in existing studies, our research, based in two distinctly different country contexts, provides unique, comparative insights into parents' understanding of their child's experiences of the dominant Covid-19 discourses they have observed.

### **Theoretical framework**

We draw on Foucault's concept of discourse to better understand how dominant discourses about the pandemic in China and the UK are reflected in the children's artwork and discussions with their parents about Covid-19, and reflect the political and social responses they have experienced.

Foucault (1986: 208-209) writes that discourses are 'the set of conditions in accordance with which a practice is exercised, in accordance with which that practice gives rise to partially or totally new statements, and in accordance with which it can be modified'. Foucault views discourse and power as intimately bound together in complex and changing formations; 'discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart' (Foucault 1998: 100-1). This research argues that public health messaging and policies related to Covid-19 school closures can be regarded as 'representations of knowledge and power, discourses that construct a topic' (Maguire *et al.*, 2011: 597). In this research, we follow Ball *et al.* (2012) and examine how the dominant discourses related to Covid-19 in the UK and China are

evident in the parents' understanding of their children's perceptions and experiences of the pandemic. We examined if there were any manifestations in the artwork and interviews of the dominant public discourses of the pandemic and if and how these have provided new insights to their parents in terms of their child's lived experiences during this time.

In addition to analysing children's experiences about the dominant discourses (Foucault, 1986) about the pandemic in China and the UK, our thematic analysis yielded important themes on how parents make sense of their children's experiences and the process of co-researching with their children.

### **Methodology and Methods**

Over the past two decades, there has been an emphasis on deploying qualitative research techniques that foreground the child's voice (Lewis, 2009). These methods have included photo diaries; focus groups (Cherland, 1994) and more recently, role play (Crivello *et al.*, 2009). These different approaches all focus on understanding the world through the child's eyes, foregrounding their experiences, and attempting to reduce the power imbalance between the researcher and the participant. However, despite this awareness, there are obstacles to working with children, particularly in the age range we focused upon in this project (4–10 years old). These include the ethical challenges associated with obtaining informed consent and challenges in making the research tools age-appropriate and meaningful to young children to ensure maximum engagement with the research activities. The Covid-19 restrictions have posed further difficulties for researchers working directly with young children. To mitigate these challenges, we engaged parents as co-researchers 'as a way of better understanding the realities of young children', based on the premise that 'parents know about their children through being with them, spending extended periods of time with them, and the daily embodied experience of parenting them' (Hackett, 2017: 482, 483).

The qualitative methodology deployed in our study sought to 'be used to give expression to, and celebration of, hidden or "silenced lives"' (Goodson & Sikes, 2001: 10). The project from which the data for this paper was derived sought to examine young children's perspectives on and experiences with Covid-19. Taking a comparative approach, the project explored how child agency is embedded and shaped in different sociocultural discourses in China and the UK, where there are different policies, situations, and media and public responses to the outbreak.

We selected the UK and China for our comparative study as there were stark differences in these two countries' responses to Covid-19. In China, the epicentre of the pandemic, the public health emphasis

was placed on the decisive role played by the medical profession in their efforts to defeat the virus discourse, enforced by recurring and complete lockdowns that are still occurring. In contrast, in the UK the response was marked by a personal responsibility discourse where individuals were expected to choose to act in the right way. The aim was to understand how children experienced these very different contexts and to identify evidence of the dominant discourse outlined here in their depictions of the pandemic.

To construct our sample, we used Twitter in the UK and WeChat in China to share the call for participants. Families were self-selecting and needed to meet the criteria of having a 4-10-year-old child that they had home-schooled during Covid-19 lockdowns. Our recruitment material highlighted the parental involvement required for this research, including their role as a co-researcher, tasked with gaining their child's ethical assent and facilitating the photos or drawings and the follow-up, interpretative conversations about their child's work. Gaining informed assent from their child was managed by parents. We noted there were challenges with young children fully understanding what was required of them and some parents reported frustration with trying to explain the purpose of the project to their child. These point raise questions about ethical practices and procedures and the limitations associated with giving voice to children in research (Facca and Gladstone, 2020).

Following Hackett's (2017: 483) argument about the 'growing need to re-balance the over-representation of white middle-class children in research', we attempted to construct a socio-economically diverse sample. However, we did not manage to locate anyone who identified as coming from a working-class background to participate in our study. Though the project details were tweeted and shared widely on several occasions, we still did not achieve breadth and depth in socio-economic status within our sample. We note the challenges to participate in social research for working class and low-income families, particularly with regards to having the technology, time and space to engage (Goudeau et al, 2021). Agreeing to be part of the project and agreeing to be researched is arguably evidence of class interest in participating in and engaging with research. We acknowledge that this is a limitation in the data gathered for the project. However, we did achieve variation in relation to ethnicity, gender and age, as highlighted in the sample table below.

*[Insert table 1 here]*

As table 1 shows, we accessed 24 children (13 in the UK and 11 in China) and their parents. Parents were co-researchers who agreed to facilitate their child's art/photo work and hold follow-up conversations with their child about the drawings/photos (Hackett, 2017). In doing so, parents have

captured their child's experiences and feelings since the coronavirus struck. Parents were then interviewed to understand their experiences of participating in the research. The conversations between parents and children lasted approximately 10–15 minutes, while the interviews between the researchers and parents lasted around 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded using Zoom and professionally transcribed. We deployed thematic coding to understand our data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). We constructed a coding protocol and applied a thematic coding strategy to make sense of our data with the research questions. Each team member independently coded the data and then compared their findings. In reviewing the analysis, shared understandings were reached, and where disagreement existed, it was debated amongst the team until a consensus was reached.

We are aware that the stories presented here offer a snapshot in time; that is, they are historically grounded, and the views expressed are fluid and subject to change as the children constructed and reconstructed their social realities, sometimes in the research process. Thus, the data presented in this paper are partial and incomplete and they provide insight into stories in progress rather than final or conclusive accounts. Yet despite the fluid nature of many of the interviews, the transcripts did allow us to search for patterns within the sample and also enabled us to construct accounts of children's experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic, in their words and through their artwork.

## **Findings**

Media have a profound impact on the ways in which our reality is constructed; they inform and help shape our ideas and beliefs about society, politics and culture (Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes, & Sasson, 1992). The particular representations of reality through selection, framing and discourse offered by the media, however, are largely shaped by socio-political ideologies. In China, the dynamic zero-COVID policy is the dominant discourse displayed on domestic media which requires fast and targeted measures aiming at detecting and containing the virus as quickly as possible to minimise at the smallest cost the pandemic's impact. Whereas in the UK, forming household support bubbles or extended households and learning to live with the virus is the dominant story on social media. Although our participants' lived experiences were shaped by different social, cultural and political contexts, there are shared experiences and feelings of their children since the coronavirus struck. Three key themes emerged, including parental relief, anxiety, and understanding. In what follows, we present parents' reflections on those three themes.

### *Relief*

In our sample, eight parents (five in the UK and three in China) expressed elements of relief when reflecting on their participation in the research activities for the project. Generally, we noted that parents saw it as an opportunity to have an open and honest conversation with their children about their experiences of lockdowns and the pandemic. In doing this, parents were impressed with their children's ability to express their thoughts and opinions intelligibly. For example, Aesha, a UK-based Indian mother to ten-year-old Dhriti, noted that participating in the research activities allowed her to have a glimpse into Dhriti's experiences of lockdown and that 'it was really lovely to hear her talk with such clarity about it ... it was nice to hear her be so eloquent and have an opinion really'. Likewise, Sophia, a British mother of five-year-old Jack, appreciated having the time and space to have an open and honest conversation with Jack as well as taking his opinions 'really seriously, really listening to what he had to say', and found it reassuring that Jack did not appear to be holding back any kind of difficulties he might be facing.

Parents in the UK and China found it heartening to hear that their children are coping well with everything that is going on and that, in some cases, their children were having positive experiences of lockdown. Despite the dreadful restrictions imposed on their everyday lives, positive effects include children's enjoyment of the increased time they spent with their family, which reportedly led to many positive lifelong memories for the child. This is an important consideration that many parents found reassuring amidst the negative mental and physical impacts of lockdowns outlined in the background section above. A few examples were given about this during the interviews: through playing games with parents - for example, Jenny, a British mother of two boys, was portrayed as a puppy in one of her child's drawings, alluding to the joyfulness at 'the idea of Mummy's at home playing with us a lot as well as with siblings (see Figure 1).





Figure 1. Drawing by Cillian, (M, 6)

Qiuge, a Chinese mother, mentioned that having four children in the house ‘created a social environment for the children’. Another example was that of trying out different recipes with family, as highlighted by Liling, a Chinese mother of seven-year-old Yinuo, who learnt through the research interviews that making different cuisines was one of the most memorable things for her daughter during the lockdown:

Through our conversations, I found that there were actually more positive gains we’d got during the lockdown. The establishment of parent-child companionship, this kind of food memory I think when she thinks about this special experience in the future, she must remember reading and cooking with her dad. These two memorable events are deeply buried in her memory. And she will never forget it for the rest of her life. (Liling)

Furthermore, parents also expressed relief at the thought that their children are still optimistic about the future, particularly with regard to the prospect of life not being dominated by the virus. For example, Dhriti, Aesha’s ten-year-old daughter, drew a picture of a lock representing the lockdown (see Figure 2). The dominant discourse of safety, so prevalent in the early pandemic stage in the UK, is evident here with Dhriti’s illustration of the big lock, which reflects the widespread societal understanding of the time that staying safe was the best way to beat the virus. Aesha expressed delight at Dhriti’s drawing of a rainbow as part of the lock as she took it as representative of the idea that ‘there’s always light’ and that ‘she has a kind of hope for the future’. Aesha was able to find relief that Dhriti was able to see both the positive and negative sides of the pandemic. Despite the doom and gloom of being in lockdown and the discourses surrounding this, Dhriti was able to exercise her agency and still be optimistic about the future.

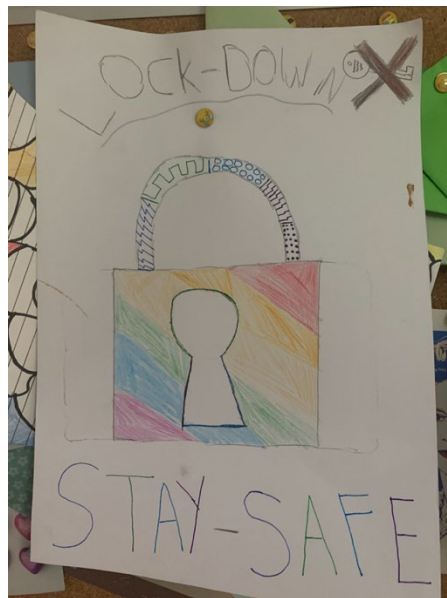


Figure 2. Drawing by Dhriti (F, 10)

Similarly for Zihang, a Chinese father of an eight-year-old boy Pengcheng, everyday discourses such as ‘doctors fighting the virus to protect people from the TV and adults’ daily conversations’ have a positive impact on his child’s perceptions of the pandemic. Pengcheng drew a scene of doctors fighting the virus, which says, ‘I am invincible!’, but the two doctors are optimistic that they can beat the virus (see Figure 3). When Zihang later asked him who he thinks will win this battle, Pengcheng responded enthusiastically, ‘Definitely the doctor!’. This response corresponds with the dominant public discourse in China articulated as ‘defeating the virus’ and is reflected in the ongoing zero-tolerance approach to the transmission of the virus.

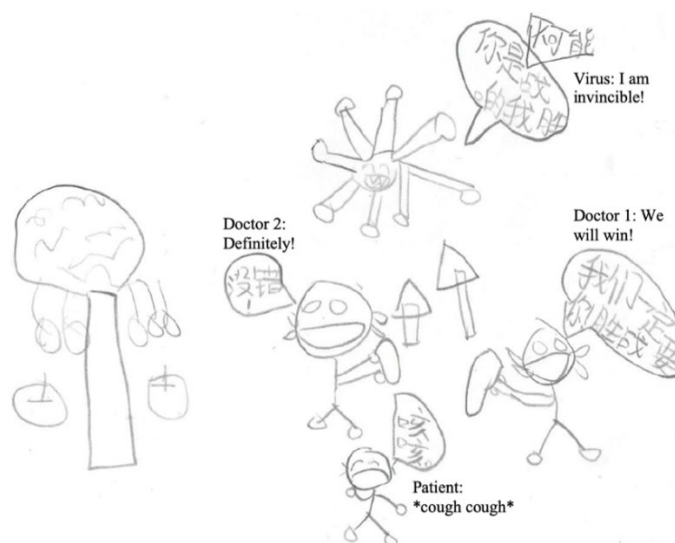


Figure 3. Drawing by Pengcheng (M, 8)

Despite differences in the sociocultural discourses surrounding the pandemic in the UK and China in terms of policies, media and public responses, there was consensus among parents from both countries that participating in the research activities provided them with a sense of relief about how their children were coping. The artwork and subsequent interviews provided space and opportunity for parents to elicit their children's experiences of the complicated and sensitive issues surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns, going beyond superficial conversations that they reported in their daily lives. The responses reflect the dominant public health and social discourses they experienced within their country's context, highlighting their capacity to understand and make sense of the pandemic (Foucault, 1986). Thus, we can see that:

... discourses are systems of representation, the rules and practices that produce meaningful statements in different historical periods. They are ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relation between them (Goswami, 2014: 14).

The dominant discourses associated with managing Covid-19 in the UK and China are reflected through the children's artwork and talk, highlighting the constitution of knowledge and the reconfiguration of social practices they have internalised about hierarchy and power in their country context.

In addition to relief, we also noted the theme of parental anxiety, which is now discussed.

### *Anxiety*

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected daily life in different ways. Through an in-depth analysis of child-parent conversations about their lived experiences during the lockdowns and reflective interviews with parents on their conversations with children, parents noted that their children felt anxious about the pandemic and its impact on their everyday life. This in turn contributed to parental anxiety about their child's social and emotional wellbeing. Four dominant discourses related to anxiety were identified; fear of infection, separation from family members and friends, desire to go out and play, and dreadful experiences of virtual schooling.

### Fear of infection

Fear and anxiety about the Covid-19 pandemic were overwhelming, resulting in mixed emotions among adults and children. During the parent interview, Jenny, a British mother of two boys,

expressed that her youngest child worried about meeting strangers during the first round of lockdowns. She managed her child's negative emotional state by telling him that 'we just need to make sure we're walking on the other side of the path'. She further emphasised that having children realise human beings could be living with the virus for years to come would help them manage their anxiety by placing it into perspective.

I think being calm with them and not telling them that it's [the coronavirus] going to be gone soon. It's just something that we're going to have to potentially just live with. So then, they're not alarmed about how we might have to live in the future; how we might have to continue social distancing. And I think if it becomes normal to them, then you eradicate the panic and the anxiety. (Jenny)

In contrast, the argument that coronavirus will coexist with humans has not been broadly discussed in China. Indeed, most of our Chinese respondents believed that human beings would succeed in the fight against the coronavirus and would conquer it in due course. For example, Ruoxi, a four-year-old girl's Chinese mother, expressed that she feared infection during the first outbreak in Wuhan. However, as time went on, she felt less scared because 'the news reports continuously updated the government's strengthened control measures, and the hospitalisation rate gradually decreased in the later stage of the lockdown'. She attributes these changes and positive developments to the zero Covid approaches deployed in China. Her experiences are a good example of a discourse that has been conditioned by rules and orders, a manifestation of the effects of larger structural influences that shape what can be said and thought at a given moment in time (Foucault, 1986). The effects of the pandemic on children were mediated in part by the country context, priorities and strategies deployed to tackle the disease and its spread.

#### Separation from family members and friends

The UK participants experienced a much more extended lockdown period than their counterparts in China in the first 18 months of the pandemic. Consequently, almost all the UK-based children expressed their feelings about missing family members or friends in their drawings of the lockdown experiences. The parents recognised their children's emotional attachment to family members and friends was disrupted by the lockdown, which raised their concerns. For example, Eva's ten-year-old son, Harry, was very upset about being unable to meet his grandparents in person because they were infected with the coronavirus. Eva showed her most significant concerns regarding Harry's emotions when reflecting on this aspect of their research activities. She was not aware that he had such a

strong emotional attachment with his grandparents, and as she put it, ‘I was quite surprised actually that he said words like upset. I don’t know how he remembers it with those emotions.’

Similarly, Sophia, a British mother of a five-year-old boy Jack, noted that the parent-child conversation they shared through participating in our research activities provided her with the opportunity to understand her son’s emotional world better (also see Figure 3).

We did bump into friends at the park, but it was always the same people. I think his actual close friends from school, we didn’t see, and he was pretty sad. He understood what was expected of him during the lockdown, and he does talk about other friends at school that he can’t see because they’re not in the same bubble. So even though they’ve gone back, they can’t play together. So yeah, it certainly just – it gave me a greater understanding of him and how he’s managing it, and that actually, he isn’t as worried about things as we thought he might have been. (Sophia)

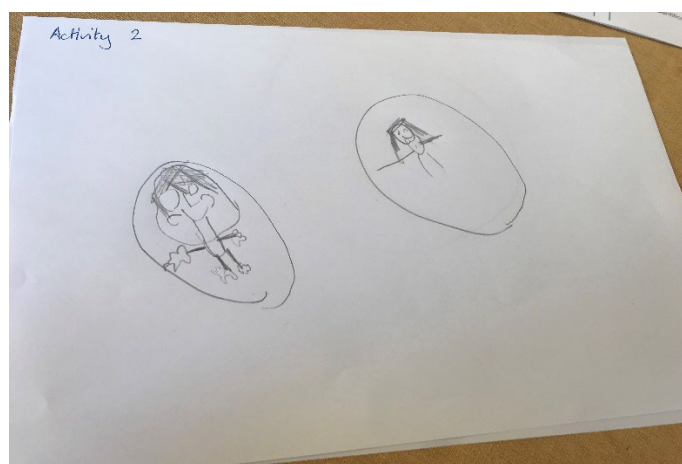


Figure 4. Drawing by Jack (M, 5)

In Jack’s drawing he has represented himself and his friend from school in separate bubbles, again reflecting a dominant discourse deployed in the UK to assist schools with reducing the spread of the virus. His reflections on his experiences with his mother revealed the sense of loss he had endured at not being able to spend time with school friends and family.

In contrast, the first lockdown in China occurred during the school winter holidays. In many children’s and parents’ eyes, the lockdown was just an extended school vacation and parents and even grandparents spent extended periods of time together. Therefore, very few Chinese children in

our sample expressed concerns about separation from family members and friends as they had not endured it at that point in the pandemic in the same way as the children in the UK.

### Desire to go out and play

Both the British and Chinese parents saw their children experience a difficult time, especially when they were not allowed to go out and play with peers due to stay-at-home restrictions. The parents were concerned about their children's mental well-being as the unexpected lockdown interrupted their daily routines. For example, Kexin, a Chinese mother of a four-year-old girl, worried her daughter would be anxious because their family had been quarantined inside their home for nearly a hundred days. Aesha in the UK also noticed her daughter couldn't go out for activities, which caused her low mood because 'we were in the house, you couldn't mix with other families, even meeting anyone in the park or anything'.

All the Chinese participants in this study lived in urban areas, and thus most of them lived in apartment buildings without any access to front or back yards. Unlike their counterparts in the UK, who have more opportunities to access green spaces to play and undertake physical activities, the intensive confinement that the Chinese participants experienced can result in much higher levels of anxiety. Connectivity with nature is essential, but the coronavirus has disconnected Chinese children from the outside world. For example, Ruoxi highlighted the significant amounts of time she had spent parenting her child during the problematic social closure, explaining that 'She needs to have her parents' company because she then didn't ask for much else. If there is no one to accompany her, you let her stay indoors every day, and I think she would be very anxious.' Even though the children in our study all expressed a desire to go out and play, they also understood the risk of catching the virus. In addition to family companionship, children in our study expressed other means by which they could cope with their stress. For instance, Yutong, a Chinese mother, noted that her daughter sometimes yelled at other children from their apartment windows, talking 'nonsense' to each other, which Yutong believed was the children's 'own way to release themselves or just a way of playing', when all other options were taken away from them.

### Experiences of remote learning

One of the most significant impacts that the Covid-19 pandemic on children was the closure of schools. During the pandemic in the UK and China, schooling was moved online as an alternative to face-to-face teaching. The children in our study all demonstrated their unhappy virtual schooling experiences through drawings and conversations with their parents. For example, in the UK, Carol's

eight-year-old daughter, Olivia, depicted herself doing schoolwork on a laptop in her drawing (see Figure 5) but found virtual schooling boring.



Figure 5. Drawing by Olivia (F, 8)

Olivia's mother noted that she was tired of being reminded to attend classes and watch endless videos uploaded by her teachers, reflected in her sad face in the drawing. Similarly, Aesha's daughter, Dhriti, also complained about her remote schooling experiences in the UK as 'everyone was scamming each other on the chats and saying silly questions, and it wasn't very fun because half of the kids probably weren't even listening'. In China, Qiuge, a mother of a six-year-old boy argued that the online learning environment failed to engage her child because 'you can only interact with the device and it won't create authentic learning environments that a real school has'. She asserted that virtual education could never replace school education. The inefficiency of remote schooling and students' disengagement appeared to be most associated with less effective teaching and learning.

Due to the lockdown, many parents in both countries worried about the effects on their children of not returning to regular schooling. Freya, a British mother of two girls, complained that '[it's been] nearly two years we couldn't go to school and it's really sad because we would have spent lots of time and we had to do homeschooling, which wasn't very good because we had to go on computers'. The remote schooling extended children's screen time, which worried a lot of parents. Many parents expressed concern about their children's physical health as excessive screen time has adverse health effects in the long run, such as symptoms like eye strain, sleep disturbance, and neck pain. For instance, Liling expressed her dissatisfaction with her seven-year-old daughter's online schooling schedule:

It was exhausting to take online classes for young children like my daughter. The online courses started from 8 am to 11:30 am, and she only had one hour break for lunch in between, and then the afternoon sessions continued until 4:30 pm. You have to be entirely concentrated on your online classes, which it's very tiring. I was very concerned that she may experience eye problems because the extended screen time would drive in eye strain. I always kept an eye on her sitting position rather than supervising her learning. If she's too close to the iPad, I'll remind her to stay back. (Liling)

Some children failed to fully engage with their virtual classroom, as Aesha's daughter has mentioned, but some also had difficulty adjusting themselves to the online learning style. For example, Eva's son had been struggling with his virtual schooling in the UK:

On Google Classroom, you can see all their lessons laid out for the whole day... He'd see all these lessons laid out and he'd just be completely overwhelmed with what he had to do that day. They could do them, you know, in any order, but he liked to do them in the order that they were laid out. If you're going to school every day, you've still got the same amount of work, but you don't have to motivate yourself, and also, you don't see all that work laid out in front of you for the day. It comes at you in sections, one at a time, throughout the day. Like on a Monday, he had his whole school day, then he had guitar online and straight after, he had karate online. So he got, yeah, really sort of anxious about the whole thing. He just, yeah, had a bit of a meltdown. (Eva)

Although the format of virtual schooling varied in both contexts, the children in our study all expressed their frustrating experiences of remote learning. The parents in our study learned from their child's artwork and interviews the challenges they experienced in adjusting to new learning environments in a short time that they had never encountered before. The dominant discourse expressed by the children and parents in both countries was one of frustration.

### *Understanding*

In drawing together the discussion in this paper, the key point is that all the parents in our study gained a better understanding of their child's daily lived experiences during the pandemic through taking part in the research. It was apparent in the interviews that many of the views and experiences expressed by children came as a surprise to their parents, particularly their sensitivity to the



implications of the pandemic, including severe illness and death. Parents had not anticipated many of the responses they had received, as evident in the following data excerpts:

Yeah, definitely, because we probably wouldn't have had that conversation otherwise. But we do often, sort of, talk about things that we did in lockdown but with a positive, you know, outlook on it and, you know, fun things we did, like the TikToks and stuff like that and, "Oh, we should do that again." You know, obviously, all the bike rides and stuff that we went on, and we haven't done those for ages. So, yeah [...] his sort of having those experiences, we probably wouldn't have had time for, you know, in everyday life, like we're back to now (Eva)

There's a discrepancy between my own perception of him and what he expressed during the activity. It helped me realise that I didn't know him that well as I thought. He read a picture book called *Badger's Gift*, and then he talked about what is life and death. I found that he knew life and death. He asked me that 'Is it death painful?' In fact, I didn't know the answer because no living person has experienced death, and no one knows whether death is painful. I guess it might be painful, and responded to him. Then he said that since death is painful, I don't want to die. He claimed that he had some thoughts on death. He said he would prepare two coins for the medical workers who passed away during the battle against the Covid. I then asked him why he needed to prepare coins. He said that if they didn't have cash, they wouldn't be able to buy food. He felt that although they were dead, they were still living a life in another world. Not just this one activity, because this activity allowed me to interact with him more, to slowly discover him and find out what I had missed before. (Haoyan)



Figure 6. Drawing by Hanyuan (M, 5)

I didn't seem to know before that she turned out to miss her classmates so much. I know she wants to go to school, but I didn't know why she loves to go to school... But the discussion on her drawing made me realise that she loves to go to school because she wants to meet her friends. (Meiqi)

Despite the 'defeating the virus' discourse in China, Haoyan learned that his son Hanyuan was concerned about the possibility of dying from Covid-19 (see Figure 5). Eva acknowledged that she had talked about the positives of lockdown with her son, but she had not anticipated the worry and concerns he was experiencing as he reflected on that period of his life. Meiqi, a UK-based Chinese mother, noted that her daughter had missed the social aspects of schooling and wanted to spend time with her friends. She knew there was an issue with her daughter, and participating in the interview enabled her to understand exactly what that issue was. These extracts illustrate many points of understanding identified by our parent participants. They reveal the value of participating in our research from the parent's perspective, as they gained an understanding of their child's lived experiences and perceptions of the pandemic in their own words. Parents expressed surprise at these new insights into their child's mind and world view. Without the research activity, such exchanges are unlikely to have taken place.

The understanding experienced by parents highlights the manifestation of dominant public health discourses in their children's daily lives. The children were all aware of how to keep safe and of the rules guiding their government's expectations of its citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic in two distinctly different country contexts. Foucault contends that,

In every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed by a certain number of procedures whose role is to ward off its powers and dangers, to gain mastery over its chance events, to evade its ponderous, formidable materiality (1971: 210).

During the pandemic it was clear that discourse fixed text with a specific meaning; public health policies required compliance and children and adults alike were impacted. The children in our research had internalised these dominant public health discourses and we can see these manifest in their artwork and experiences.

## **Discussion**

In times of unprecedented change and challenges, the pressure on families and children has been extreme. By utilising a child-centred data collection approach, we provided parents with a window into their child's world. As Prout and James (1990: 8) remind us, 'Children are and must be seen as

active in the construction and determination of their own social lives, the lives of those around them and of the societies in which they live'. By participating in our research, parents were able to understand better their child's lived experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic, which enabled them to reflect on how they might further support their child emotionally and socially. Taking part in the research activities allowed parents to talk with their children about these difficult and sensitive issues in a new space, going beyond superficial conversations that they reported in their daily lives.

Focusing on the impact of the dominant public discourses of 'defeating the virus' and 'personal responsibility' on children, we identified evidence of parental relief and anxiety amongst the parent participants as they gained more understanding of their child's worldview. Parents commented that the interviews provided a space to address the issues directly with their child where anxiety was identified. The artwork and interview data confirmed children have taken on dominant public health discourses that have emerged through the political and social responses they have experienced, even amongst our youngest participations aged 4-6 years old. The data confirms that the discourses of covid have transmitted real and imagined power to shape children's lives. The discourses are arguably undermined and exposed by parents through interview conversation, thus confirming that dominant discourse can be rendered 'fragile' making them 'possible to thwart' (Foucault 1998: 100-101), even in subtle and understated ways. For parents, the experience as co-researchers has provided them with their child's representations of the dominant discourses, revealing both expected and unexpected insights. There is a temptation and perhaps a social expectation for parents to know the life of the mind of their child, but as this study confirms, this is often not the case. The data collection process arguably confirms that by prioritising a child's agency and voice, new insights into their worlds are possible (Scherer, 2016). The visual methods employed in this study 'provided children with the opportunity to occupy a position of agentic freedom and authority', through which their 'rights to experience agency, self-presentation and the validation of personal capabilities' were recognised (Bernadi 2020:68). From these insights, a better, more informed, and holistic understanding of the child emerges, enabling parents to consider how best to support their child through the pandemic in ways that might otherwise have been unidentified. This is essential and empowering knowledge for parents as the pandemic is far from over in China and the UK.

We are aware that the study has some limitations. First, all the participating parents from both the UK and China have relatively high socioeconomic status in their respective societies, thus the challenges they encountered during the lockdowns might be much less severe than those experienced by working-class families. It was notable that 20 out of 24 participating children were from families of teachers or education professionals whose parents are potentially more experienced in coping with

children's negative emotions, placing them into a shared social group. The parents' educational background and family social, economic and cultural backgrounds are specific. Therefore, the findings from the current study cannot be generalised to a broader social group in either country.

A further challenge noted by some parents was their perception that they lacked the skills to ask follow-up questions to elicit more information from their children. Whilst some parents found the question list we provided useful, some parents pointed out that such question list actually restricted their questioning. Finally, some parents appreciated this opportunity to interact with their child; they acknowledged the difficulties to set aside time to have meaningful individual conversations with their child, particularly in families with multiple children. These limitations shed light on the obstacles faced by parents to gaining a better understanding of their children in daily life.

Given our sample's lack of socio-economic diversity, future studies are encouraged to focus on socioeconomically disadvantaged children to better understand their dominant discourses of the pandemic. Furthermore, children's experience of the Covid-19 pandemic is evolving as it continues to progress. The data for this study were collected in the spring of 2021, during which time the Covid-19 virus variants of Delta and Omicron were not yet identified in the UK or China. However, with the subsequent widespread of these new variants in both countries, children in China have been experiencing more stringent control and quarantine measures while their counterparts in the UK have been learning to live with the disease. Therefore, longitudinal and follow-up studies are necessary to be conducted in the future to continuously monitor children's development of their perceptions of and experiences with the Covid-19.

Despite these limitations to the study, our findings are important and timely. Remote learning has the potential to increase accessibility for those children unable to attend a physical institution in a wide range of circumstances, for example, those with mobility issues or extended poor health. As such, it is essential to understand the potential barriers but also opportunities created by the pandemic and the move to online learning in the home from the perspective of children themselves.

## References

- Achterberg, M., Dobbelaar, S., Boer, O. D., & Crone, E. A. (2021) Perceived stress as mediator for longitudinal effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on wellbeing of parents and children. *Scientific Reports*, 11(1), 2971. doi:10.1038/s41598-021-81720-8.
- Ball, S. J., Maguire, M. & Braun, A. (2012) *How schools do policy: Policy enactments in secondary school* (London, Routledge).
- Bernardi, F. (2020). Autonomy, spontaneity and creativity in research with children: A study of experience and participation, in central Italy and North West England. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 23(1), 55-74. doi:10.1080/13645579.2019.1672280.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3, 77-101. doi: 10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brown, S. M., Doom, J. R., Lechuga-Peña, S., Watamura, S. E., & Koppels, T. (2020) Stress and parenting during the global COVID-19 pandemic. *Child Abuse Negl*, 110(Part 2), 104699. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104699.
- Cellini, N., Di Giorgio, E., Mioni, G., & Di Riso, D. (2021) Sleep and psychological difficulties in Italian school-age children during COVID-19 lockdown. *Journal of Pediatric Psychology*, 46(2), 153-167. doi: 10.1093/jpepsy/jsab003.
- Cherland, M. R. (1994) *Private practices: Girls reading fiction and constructing identity* (London, Taylor & Francis).
- Clark, C. D. (2010) *In a younger voice: Doing child-centered qualitative research* (Oxford, Oxford University Press).
- Crivello, G., Camfield, L. & Woodhead, M. (2009) How can children tell us about their wellbeing? Exploring the potential of participatory research approaches within young lives. *Social Indicators Research*, 90, 51–72. doi: 10.1007/s11205-008-9312-x
- Facca, D., Gladstone, B., & Teachman, G. (2020). Working the limits of “giving voice” to children: A critical conceptual review. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 19, doi:10.1177/1609406920933391.
- Foucault, M. (1998) *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (London, Penguin).
- Foucault, M. (1986) *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Foucault, M. (1971). Orders of discourse. *Social Science Information*, 10 (2): 7–30.
- Gamson, W. A., Croteau, D., Hoynes, W., & Sasson, T. (1992). Media images and the social construction of reality. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18, 373–393. doi: 10.1146/annurev.so.18.080192.002105
- Ge, Y., Song, L., Clancy, R. F., & Qin, Y. (2019) Studies on left-behind children in China: Reviewing paradigm shifts. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, 2019(163),

115-135. doi: 10.1002/cad.20267.

- Goodson, I. F. & Sikes, P. (2001) 'Studying teachers' life histories and professional practice'. In I. Goodson & P. Sikes, *Life history research in educational settings: Learning from lives* (Buckingham, Open University Press), 57-74.
- Goswami, S. (2014). Michel Foucault: Structures of truth and power. *European Journal of Philosophical Research*, (1), 8-20. doi: 10.13187/ejpr.2014.1.8
- Goudeau, S., Sanrey, C., Stanczak, A., Manstead, A., & Darnon, C. (2021). Why lockdown and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic are likely to increase the social class achievement gap. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 5(10), 1273-1281. doi: 10.1038/s41562-021-01212-7.
- Hackett, A. (2017) Parents as researchers: collaborative ethnography with parents. *Qualitative Research*, 17(5), 481-497. doi:10.1177/1468794116672913.
- House of Commons. (2021) *Migrant statistics* (CBP06077). Retrieved from: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06077/SN06077.pdf>
- Kwong, A. S. F., Pearson, R. M., Adams, M. J., Northstone, K., Tilling, K., Smith, D., . . . Timpson, N. J. (2021) Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic in two longitudinal UK population cohorts. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 218(6), 334-343. doi:10.1192/bjp.2020.242.
- Lee, S. J., Ward, K. P., Lee, J. Y., & Rodriguez, C. M. (2021). Parental social isolation and child maltreatment risk during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Family Violence*. doi:10.1007/s10896-020-00244-3.
- Lewis, A. (2010) Silence in the context of 'child voice'. *Children & Society*, 24(1), 14-23. doi:10.1111/j.1099-0860.2008.00200.x.
- Liu, J., Zhou, T., Yuan, M., Ren, H., Bian, X., & Coplan, R. J. (2021) Daily routines, parent-child conflict, and psychological maladjustment among Chinese children and adolescents during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Family Psychology*. doi:10.1037/fam0000914
- Ma, Z., Idris, S., Zhang, Y., Zewen, L., Wali, A., Ji, Y., . . . Baloch, Z. (2021) The impact of COVID-19 pandemic outbreak on education and mental health of Chinese children aged 7-15 years: an online survey. *BMC Pediatr*, 21(1), 95. doi:10.1186/s12887-021-02550-1.
- Maguire, M., Hoskins, K., Ball, S. & Braun, A. (2011) Policy discourses in school texts. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32(4), 597-609, doi: 10.1080/01596306.2011.601556 .
- Mantovani, S., Bove, C., Ferri, P., Manzoni, P., Cesa Bianchi, A., & Picca, M. (2021) Children 'under lockdown': voices, experiences, and resources during and after the COVID-19 emergency. Insights from a survey with children and families in the Lombardy region of Italy.

- Morelli, M., Cattelino, E., Baiocco, R., Trumello, C., Babore, A., Candelori, C., & Chirumbolo, A. (2020) Parents and children during the COVID-19 lockdown: The influence of parenting distress and parenting self-efficacy on children's emotional well-being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11(2584). doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.584645.
- Orgilés, M., Morales, A., Elvecchio, E., Mazzeschi, C., & Espada, J. P. (2020) Immediate psychological effects of the COVID-19 quarantine in youth from Italy and Spain. *PsyArXiv*, 1-13. doi:10.31234/osf.io/5bpfz.
- Pierce, M., Hope, H., Ford, T., Hatch, S., Hotopf, M., John, A., . . . Abel, K. M. (2020) Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 7(10), 883-892. doi: 10.1016/S2215-0366(20)30308-4.
- Prime, H., Wade, M., & Browne, D. T. (2020) Risk and resilience in family well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. *American Psychologist*, 75(5), 631-643. doi:10.1037/amp0000660.
- Prout, A. & James, A. (1990) 'A new paradigm for the sociology of childhood? Provenance, promise and problems'. In A. James & A. Prout (Eds.), *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: Contemporary issues in the sociological study of childhood* (London, Falmer), 7-23.
- Roos, L. E., Salisbury, M., Penner-Goeke, L., Cameron, E. E., Protudjer, J. L. P., Giuliano, R., . . . Reynolds, K. (2021) Supporting families to protect child health: Parenting quality and household needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. *PLoS ONE*, 16, e0251720. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0251720.
- Rosen, M., Rodman, A., Kasparek, S., Mayes, M., Freeman, M., Lengua, L., . . . McLaughlin, K. (2021) Promoting youth mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic: A longitudinal study. *PLoS ONE*, 16(8), e0255294. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0255294.
- Saladino, V., Algeri, D., & Auriemma, V. (2020) The psychological and social impact of Covid-19: New perspectives of well-being. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11(2550). doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2020.577684.
- Scherer, L. (2016). Children's engagements with visual methods through qualitative research in the primary school as 'Art that Didn't Work.' *Sociological Research Online*, 21(1), 1-16. doi:10.5153/sro.3805.
- Shevlin, M., McBride, O., Murphy, J., Miller, J. G., Hartman, T. K., Levita, L., . . . Bentall, R. P. (2020) Anxiety, depression, traumatic stress and COVID-19-related anxiety in the UK general population during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BJPsych Open*, 6(6), e125. doi:10.1192/bjo.2020.109.
- Singh, S., Roy, D., Sinha, K., Parveen, S., Sharma, G., & Joshi, G. (2020) Impact of COVID-19 and

- lockdown on mental health of children and adolescents: A narrative review with recommendations. *Psychiatry Research*, 293, 113429. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113429.
- Tambling, R. R., Tomkunas, A. J., Russell, B. S., Horton, A. L., & Hutchison, M. (2021) Thematic analysis of parent–child conversations about COVID-19: “Playing it safe”. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 30(2), 325-337. doi:10.1007/s10826-020-01889-w.
- Toran, M., Sak, R., Xu, Y., Şahin-Sak, İ. T., & Yu, Y. (2021) Parents and children during the COVID-19 quarantine process: Experiences from Turkey and China. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 19(1), 21-39. doi:10.1177/1476718X20977583.
- Tso, W. W. Y., Wong, R. S., Tung, K. T. S., Rao, N., Fu, K. W., Yam, J. C. S., . . . Ip, P. (2020) Vulnerability and resilience in children during the COVID-19 pandemic. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. doi:10.1007/s00787-020-01680-8.
- Vaterlaus, J. M., Shaffer, T., Patten, E. V., & Spruance, L. A. (2021) Parent–child relationships and the COVID-19 pandemic: An exploratory qualitative study with parents in early, middle, and late adulthood. *Journal of Adult Development*, 28(3), 251-263. doi:10.1007/s10804-021-09381-5.
- Westrupp, E. M., Bennett, C., Berkowitz, T., Youssef, G. J., Toumbourou, J. W., Tucker, R., . . . Sciberras, E. (2021) Child, parent, and family mental health and functioning in Australia during COVID-19: comparison to pre-pandemic data. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. doi:10.1007/s00787-021-01861-z.
- Wu, S., Yao, M., Deng, C., Marsiglia, F. F., & Duan, W. (2021). Social Isolation and Anxiety Disorder During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Lockdown in China. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 294, 10-16. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2021.06.067
- Xu, Y. (2020) Does the gender of a practitioner matter in early childhood education and care? Perspectives from Scottish and Chinese young children. *Children & Society*, 34(5), 354-370. doi:10.1111/chso.12371.