A Bird’s Eye View: Care, Control, and the Use of Surveillance Apps Among Family Members in Germany

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A Bird’s Eye View: Care, Control, and the Use of Surveillance Apps Among Family Members in Germany. This paper explores how digital tracking is incorporated into family life in Munich. Parents using tracking technologies found them to be useful in caring for their children’s safety and preventing violence. This paper argues that monitoring was characterised by moral friction, since parents wanted their children to be more independent and questioned whether they should control their everyday movements and online activities, but were anxious about what could happen if they did not track their children digitally. The paper reports qualitative research involving both interviews (21 with parents and 8 with children) and participant observation in home settings or community organisations. The paper also analyses children’s experiences, who found tracking to be useful in emergencies or for locating their parents, but mostly used social media sites such as Snapchat to monitor their friends or siblings. The paper discusses horizontal forms of surveillance in which children would check their parent’s or friend’s locations in real time. As such, we see multiple ways through which notions of familial care are negotiated in relation to the use of digital tracking.

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Introduction

Digital media and various technologies are increasingly offering new ways for parents and children to stay connected and enabling family members to monitor and care for each other at a distance (Marx – Steeves 2010; Ema – Fujigaki 2011; Hagendorff – Hagendorff 2019; Hjorth et al. 2020; Berg – Wehrheim 2021; Widmer – Albrechtslund 2021; Mols et al. 2023; Liu 2024). While the monitoring of children has long been a core feature of childhood, e.g. when parents or other caretakers watch over children, recent technological innovations have enabled the monitoring of children and young people to reach high levels of intensity and ubiquity (Taylor – Rooney 2016). In this paper I report data collected over nine months in Germany, meeting and interviewing families who use tracking apps or smartwatches to locate each other in real time, or to monitor media usage at home. Parents in my research reported that they use...
apps such as *Familylink*³ and *Life360*⁴ that can monitor their children’s movements and online activities when using smartphones. Others invest in smartwatches that can be attached to a child’s wrist, which can track a child’s location but can also be used as a calling device.

When discussing the topic of surveillance in Germany, it is important to mention that there has been a protest against data capture over the last 40 years, which includes for instance the retention of data by mobile phone companies, the collection of data by Google street view, and the increase of police surveillance powers (Cummings 2017; Schnell 2018). This is closely related to wanting to prevent a kind of surveillance that was prominent during the *Stasi* regime in the former East Germany that ended in 1990 in which surveillance was a powerful way of imposing order and controlling others. The Ministry of State security commonly referred to as the Stasi administered informal workers who secretly gathered information within close family and friend networks (Lichter et al. 2021). My research participants were born either outside Germany or in the former West Germany, but discussions about privacy and autonomy have undoubtedly shaped public discourse around privacy and children’s autonomy.

**Surveillance and the family**

Surveillance has often been seen as an abusive form of knowledge extraction that threatens fundamental rights and freedom, or a powerful way of imposing social order and controlling others. Since Foucault’s (2012 [1975]) seminal work on the panopticon social scientists have explored how power produces subjects through normalisation rather than punishment (Peacock et al. 2023). While surveillance is often reinforced by normalisation, other studies have focused on the entanglement of care, and control, and especially how watching over is sometimes desired, and welcomed in home settings particularly with the increased use of various technologies (Albrechtslund 2008; Shi 2023; Liu 2024).

Since around the year 2000, Global Positioning Technologies (GPS) have been used in a broad range of contexts for a wide set of purposes, including the tracking of children or the elderly, allowing care-workers or parents to find

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³ Google Family Link is a family service owned by Google. The app allows parents to restrict screen time use, guide them on content, set permissions regarding websites, but also a geolocation sharing function that allows parents to track their children on the move, as long as they carry their device https://families.google/familylink/ (Accessed 17/11/23).

⁴ Life360 is a family social networking app released in 2008. Family members can track each other in real time in a so-called ‘family circle’ at a distance if they are carrying their devices. The free version of the app offers two days of location history and two places of receiving unlimited alerts. The paid version of Life360 offers more features including unlimited place alerts, 30 days of location sharing history, crime reports, individual driver reports and roadside assistance. https://www.life360.com/uk/ (Accessed 17.11.2023)
their locations by logging onto a map (Michael et al. 2006). One example is radio frequency information technologies (RFID), first used in Japan in 2004. A RFID tag might be attached to a child’s school bag to inform parents about the exact time a child would arrive at the school gate, with information sent directly to the parent’s mobile phone (Ema – Fujigaki 2011). A growing body of literature focuses on how family members keep track of each other’s geolocations or online activities using sensors, trackers, cameras or phone apps (Katz 2001; Clark 2013; Boyd 2014; Livingstone – Blum-Ross 2020; Lupton 2020; Mascheroni 2020; Berg – Wehrheim 2021; Jeffery 2021; Shi 2023; Liu 2024). Previous research on the use of family surveillance technologies have focused on applications with location-based tracking (Simpson 2014; Ervasti et al. 2016; Sukk – Siibak 2021), apps that track pregnancy and infancy (Barassi 2017; Leaver 2017; Lupton 2020; Mascheroni 2020), digital games and toys (Holloway 2019), and other digital devices such as CCTV cameras or Alexa devices in households (Barassi 2020; Liu 2024). Other studies have focused on how children might be compelled to self-track their own activities due to growing up in environments where they are socialised to surveillance imaginations and practices, such as parents tracking their exercise goals (Neff – Nafus 2016; Lupton – Williamson 2017; Mascheroni 2020).

A core part of studies on surveillance have focused on the entanglement of care and control. Monitoring children’s activities and screen time use can be done with the intention of wanting to keep children safe, and to show them care in a context where they can thrive, but at the same time entail other motivations related to direction, proscription and control. The desire to know where a child is reveals an ambiguity between control and care, and the constant negotiation of this tension (Garey – Nelson 2009; Lyon, 2018; Widmer – Albrechtslund 2021). Yet surveillance also brings about convenience, and is deeply woven into care practices, for instance within families (Widmer – Albrechtslund 2021). Care can lead to increased control, but on the other hand monitoring and surveillance can be motivated by care and the desire to do good (Taylor – Rooney 2016; Hagendorff – Hagendorff 2019), although the ‘good’ is never clearly defined and always something that is being worked out and reflected on in practice and in conversations (Møl et al. 2010). Albrechtslund (2008) discusses how surveillance has often been described as a hierarchical system of power between the watcher and those being watched – in which those under scrutiny have been portrayed as relatively passive. Yet, he points out that this conventional understanding does not consider how surveillance can also be horizontal and characterised by positive aspects about being under (mutual) surveillance. As I will demonstrate, my data shows that children engage in more horizontal forms of surveillance – what Albrechtslund (2008) has defined as ‘participatory surveillance’, characterised by children checking their friend’s
locations in Snapchat, or using an app to see when their parents would come back home. In the following section I describe the key theoretical inspirations in the paper.

**Theoretical inspirations**

This paper provides novel insights concerning how surveillance in the family is connected with moral meaning making (Shi 2023), in which participants reflect on the use of digital surveillance technologies in their everyday lives. Recognising surveillance as closely related to morality opens space for an investigation of how it can be characterised by moral tensions – such as participants questioning their own practices and reflecting on ‘good parenthood’ in the context of change. As pointed out by Shi (2023) surveillance technologies are not just objects but are integral to lived experiences, and are not necessarily fixed with stable moral codes but can embody to overcome or avoid value conflicts. Shi (2023: 5) describes moral friction as mundane and ‘constant ethical oscillations intersubjectively experienced by social actors’. As my data will demonstrate, parents sometimes disagreed on methods of watching over children and whether technologies were needed to facilitate this, as they constantly reflected upon whether they thought their own digital surveillance practices can be considered ethical. This paper also works with Mol, Moser and Pols (2010) conceptualisation of ‘care as tinkering’, which they describe as a continuous form of practical testing, exploring and adapting until a suitable material, emotional or relational arrangement is achieved. Care, they argue, is not defined and can be both verbal and non-verbal. Care is worked out in negotiation with others in everyday situations. Mol, Moser and Pols (2010) remind us that the performance of values are embedded in care practices, and it is hence important to explore how people value the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’, and how they include or exclude certain practices as caring or non-caring. Technology has often been conceptualised in opposition to care, whereby care has been associated with warmth and love, and technology as rational and cold. Rather than thinking of technology versus care, Mol, Moser and Pols (2010) seek to reframe them together. In the context of surveillance apps, the apps are sometimes used as a ‘go-between’ that connects parents and children, e.g., parents monitoring screen time use, and suggesting that this reduced conflicts in the household. Likewise, a smartwatch or a phone can be understood as a technical device that helps parents or children to keep track of each other, and hence assisted non-technical ‘watching’ in new ways, beyond the physicality of where they were. In the following section, I explore the core methodological approach as well as the selection of respondents.
Methods

The research that this paper is based on was conducted over a period of nine months in Bavaria, Germany between 2022-23. The project is embedded within a detailed approach which sought to develop extended relationships with families and engagement within local interest groups focused upon family, community, or in some instances, digital engagement or activism. The data specifically drawn upon in this paper are interviews with 21 parents, the large majority being women (16 out of 21), eight children (7 girls, 1 boy, aged 8-15). Twenty of the parent interviews and 7 of the child interviews were recorded and transcribed. All children who participated were children of adult interviewees. Around nine of the adult respondents had never used surveillance apps, although two had installed the apps without ever looking at them. 11 of the adult respondents used surveillance apps either weekly or monthly or had used them previously. The paper primarily focuses on those who use surveillance apps in caring for their children either on a frequent or occasional basis. Data with interviewees who were more critical of surveillance apps – usually due to scepticism about the retention of data by various companies and the perceived risks associated with this – has been analysed elsewhere (Dungey, Forthcoming).

A snowball sampling method was deployed, in which respondents referred me to other respondents., I engaged in various community events (such as coffee meetings) in which I could grow my network, and some of these parents invited me to their private homes after some time, after which I got to know and spend time with their children. During the initial period of data collection on digital surveillance in Germany it was difficult to find parents who admitted that they used surveillance apps. Most said that they did not know anyone who would track their children, and many felt that there was not a need to do this. However, after several months of fieldwork I eventually found respondents, often with international backgrounds, who had lived in Germany between two and 24 years, who used surveillance apps on a regular basis, and who had recommended the use of these to other parents in their neighbourhood. Some parents who agreed to do semi-structured interviews did not think their children would be interested, so did not permit a follow up interview with their children. Interviews were conducted in both German and English, sometimes both within the same interview, depending on the preference of the participants, as some were not native German speakers. Interview quotes used in this paper are identified as either originally English or translated from German. In some instances, in the text a term in English will be used, followed by the original German term in brackets.

Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect participants. The project was approved by King’s College London’s ethics committee. Parents had to
give their consent for their children to participate, but children were also asked separately if they wanted to take part in the project. Observations with parents and children were conducted in home settings. Child-friendly methods from the new sociology of childhood were used (Prout – James 1997). This approach foregrounds young people’s agency and their capabilities, and pays attention to how children might have different ideas than adults. Following Mandell (1988) I used the ‘least adult role’ to study children, by for instance playing with children as part of the research method. This involved engaging with children as they used their digital devices, as well as creative activities like drawing and other forms of play.

To analyse the data, I used manual coding to identify and analyse relevant analytical themes that emerged in fieldnotes and interviews (Hammersley – Atkinson 2019). The paper reports vignettes from case studies to illuminate these key analytical ideas. The paper is written from a position of commitment to detailed observation and explication of lived experience, to embed our understandings of any research setting – here digital family surveillance – in the situated social context of specific people and their lives. As such, the analysis works through the daily, and sometimes exceptional, experiences of my respondents, to offer a level of depth and nuance to the study of digitally mediated families and the practices, values, and dilemmas that shape their collective engagements. To this end, the specific case studies reported have been selected as examples of families that use and support digital family surveillance apps, and provide analytically rich narratives. As will become clear, they provide important insights to the key themes of control, organisation, risk, and surveillance as exception.

While the methods used in this study are clear and robust, there are also limitations. The research has been conducted mainly in home or public settings with parents and children often interacting together and sharing their perspectives on digital monitoring. Another approach would be to engage with children without their parents e.g. when walking to school, or at school, and exploring their perspectives on being tracked, and how they experience real time monitoring while travelling. Moreover, the study is largely drawing on mother’s experiences of monitoring and further studies could focus more on father’s experiences of this.

**Between care and control**

In what follows, I report analysis of the data through this set of vignettes each focused upon the experiences of specific families. Across these, I build up an account of how care is negotiated around the appropriate deployment of surveillance technologies within family units. Specifically, I focus upon themes of control, organisation, risk, and surveillance as exception.
This first vignette focuses upon the ongoing negotiation of what counts as care in the context of family digital surveillance, and what counts as control. This vignette is crucial since it demonstrates how watching over can be motivated by fear and wanting to prevent violence. Mariya - the mother - valued autonomy and explicitly stated this, she frequently worried about her daughter’s whereabouts. She did not think parents were responsible if they did not check their children’s locations such as by geo-monitoring them. Mariya is in her early 40s, and tracks her fourteen-year-old daughter several times a day. She uses a paid version of the surveillance app Life360, which gives her more alerts than the free version. As she explained to me in an interview, for her this is both a moral and practical issue:

I know people who don’t have children, who will say, this is too much control, this is bad for your child, but they have no children. They could never know what is correct and not correct…. But we should not mix control with caring for people. Caring is one thing, control is another thing. Caring to support each other, to wish the child is doing well, doesn’t need your help because the help is here, he can always ask for help and gets the help. And he is secure, also from outside and also from inside, secure just feeling well, not in danger, has everything what he needs in his life. Control is another thing, if you want to know what your child is thinking about, you control what he is reading now, and if you know it doesn’t work for you, you blame your child. If you say, you cannot leave the house at all, this is control. If you forbid to meet people, this is control. If you want to control what the child is eating, this is extremely strict. The child should not feel he is under pressure (Interview with Mariya, June 2023, conducted in English and German).

It is clear in the example above that Mariya was reflecting upon the moral friction (Shi 2023) within her own practices and whether she thought they were ethical. She seemed to be troubled by judgements about being a controlling parent from people who did not have children, and clearly wanted to emphasise that she was nurturing her child to be independent by allowing her daughter to visit a larger range of places with a surveillance app than she would have allowed without the app. Her discussion of care and control is a form of tinkering (Mol et al. 2010) in which Mariya was trying to work out how she could show the best level of care for her daughter that did not overstep her boundaries, or push her to feel controlled by her mother against her will. Care and control became everyday practices negotiated through, and mediated by, Life360 as part of family life.

Mariya explained how she did not find Munich particularly safe anymore, due to incidences of crime that she had seen on the news. She mentioned how a girl had been attacked in a forest in another location in Germany, and subsequently died, which, Mariya felt, may not have happened if the parents had
used a tracking app. She suggested that trust relations were no longer the same as they had been 20-30 years ago in Germany, and she found it difficult to trust neighbours, or people that her daughter might encounter that she did not know. Mariya did not allow her daughter to visit strangers at home that her daughter had never met before. She thought that life had changed with increased immigration to Germany, and people not knowing each other well enough, as well as lack of trust. Although she had migrated to Germany herself more than two decades ago and defined herself as a foreigner (eine Ausländerin) with few German friends, she thought the presence of refugees (Flüchtlinge) increased the likelihood of criminal activity, and girls being abducted. Through this narrative of difference, she sets up everyday life as a space of risk, allowing digital monitoring to be positioned as an appropriate model of care. In practice, Mariya checked her daughter’s location often, and occasionally her husband’s location in real time whenever she had time for this. Doing so was both a practice of care in response to this narrative of risk, but also a useful practical tool that was helpful to know when her daughter would come home, so Mariya could start cooking. The use of surveillance for everyday convenience works both ways, Mariya said that her daughter also sometimes wanted to know when her parents were coming home, and would check the app Life360 instead of calling. This was not something that her daughter expressed herself in everyday conversations with me, as the daughter suggested instead that Life360 was just an app that her mother used.

However, Mariya grew up in a country where she had been fearful of walking alone, and this shaped her current fear of her daughter walking through the forest. As a child she had seen men revealing themselves in a sexualised way in the forest. Mariya felt her daughter’s childhood was safer than her own, since she always had the option of monitoring her at a distance, and could respond quickly if her daughter was not moving in the app and she was far away from her expected location. Mariya articulated a limit on the level of appropriate oversight and control. She did not want to prevent her daughter from leaving the house, or stop her from travelling on her own to school. She also did not want to monitor her media content or read her private messages, as she felt that her daughter needed some privacy, and saw this form of surveillance as ‘bad’. She also set a limit on her existing surveillance activities, as she expected that she would track her daughter until she was around 18. Through this lifelong biographical narrative – of both her own life and the imagined future life of her daughter – in combination with an account of change over time in German society, Mariya articulates a particular model of appropriate care, and the role of digital surveillance technology within it. She articulates her practice through the moral friction of trying to reconcile competing models of appropriate parenting, based upon judgements of risk and responsibility, as well as the practi-
cal organisation and timing of everyday activities such as cooking, and how these can be reasonably afforded via the range of digital surveillance services available to her.

**Tracking to organise family life**

The theme of organisation found in Mariya’s case also featured more widely across my data. This vignette focuses upon Karen, a 48-year-old mother who arrived in Munich with her husband in 2017. They had both lived in several countries before arriving in Munich, but her husband is originally born in Germany. Karen and Stefan have two children – one girl, Ella, who is 9 and attends Grade 4, and Alina, another daughter who is 15 years old and attends grade 9. Ella and Alina both had mobile phones, although the youngest does not yet have a phone with a sim card which meant that she could not be tracked at a distance. This case is important for understanding how technologies are used when managing children’s schedules and routines, yet geo-monitoring is not always used in the first instance as a form of care, due to children not being seen as old enough to take care of a mobile phone.

Initially, I met Karen in a neighbourhood group meetup. The neighbourhood group is open for everyone across age, gender and nationality but is mostly visited by women – particularly over 50 who attend e.g., coffee meetings, language courses or sports activities. Karen’s husband, Stefan, around 50 years old, works full time, and is mostly at home in the evenings or during the weekends. Karen’s schedule is slightly more flexible, and she hence had more time to meet up and participate in the study. Karen explained that they use a tracking app to keep an eye on each other – husband, wife, and their eldest daughter. Stefan for instance tracked Karen when he wanted to know where the neighbourhood group was located, rather than looking at a map but otherwise did not talk about the app in my presence, except when asked specifically. Explaining why they tracked each other, Karen said that it ‘saved time’, as well as allowing a sense of appropriate control:

Yeah, I suppose there's a slight sense of satisfaction, when I know exactly where she [her 15-year-old daughter] is. You feel like you're kind of like, you know. Yeah, in control a bit, you know, kind of a bird's eye view (Interview with Karen, Jan 2023, conducted in English).

Karen was motivated to care for her children and was anxious that anything might happen to them when outside the home. At the same time, Karen seemed motivated by the ‘act of tracking’ to satisfy her own need for control, suggesting here that this form of surveillance was more hierarchical.
Children, as well as adults, can be engaged in the ongoing negotiation of how and when surveillance is used among the family. Alina had the app Life360 installed on her phone, but said she rarely opens it, although I observed that she used her father’s phone to track her own phone when it had been stolen and thrown in a bush at a fun park event that we attended together in May 2023. Alina mostly did not use Life360, and explained that it was just running in the background. Yet, Alina, never mentioned how she felt about her mother checking to see where she was, perhaps because her mother was often present during these interactions, and she did not want to contradict her. Alina seemed to be more interested in other apps that could potentially make her more productive with her time, and hence more productive at school, and showed little interest in Life360, arguing instead that her productivity app ‘Routinary’ was extremely significant for living (lebensnotwendig) since it helped her structure her everyday routines. This form of self-surveillance could have been her way to gain a sense of control in which she recorded the timings of everyday activities.

While Karen did not track her youngest daughter, she engaged in sufficient tinkering to find a way of making sure that she had reached school safely. Karen’s neighbour tracked her own daughter, and Ella would walk with her to school after which Karen’s neighbour sent a screenshot of the app she was using. This made Karen feel more comfortable about her daughter arriving safely at school, even though schools usually called the parents if the children had not arrived on time.

For Karen, tracking in the app was very much a way of managing time in the family, when she was not sure where Alina and Stefan were. If she could see that her husband was on the way home from work in the app, she would start cooking. However, Karen emphasised that she did not do this all the time:

> You know, with Alina I don't feel too bad [walking on her own]. So, like, a lot of times, I would track her only when there's specific reason. And like when I really don't know where she is. You know, I want to maybe start a meal, and I don't know… when she'll get back to eat together…or if it was very dark or late, then I might do it. Yeah, but most time it's pretty cool, but with Ella. Yeah, I do feel a bit more vulnerable because she's younger (Interview with Karen, January 2023, conducted in English).

Although Karen viewed her neighbourhood as relatively safe, having the app gave her an extra reassurance. Karen was quite happy to share her personal information in the app, explaining that they offered a free service. Discussing this on another occasion, Karen told me that she had seen the film Snowden (2016), a film about mass surveillance and data safety. Karen did not like surveillance if taxpayers were paying money to uphold a government machi-
nery of surveillance. Managing her family life, on the other hand, was different, since she only used surveillance apps a couple of times a week, when she needed to know when to start cooking. Here she used the family context to smooth over any moral friction that might be found in the connection between Snowden and her day-to-day practices. She felt it was fine to have access to her children’s data, and suggested that her children did not get to choose whether they wanted to be tracked, since she thought parents should make this kind of decision on behalf of their children. She sent a laughing smiley when she explained this to me in a text message, probably because she did not see herself as too strict with her daughters, although she did think monitoring her children was important and wanted to decide how this was done. There was clearly a hierarchical relationship of power between Karen and her daughters in this example, since she decided that they needed to be monitored, yet Karen was motivated by the children’s safety and their well-being and saw this kind of surveillance as fundamentally good as opposed to a government machinery of surveillance that she conceptualised as ‘bad’. Karen was optimistic about the benefits of digital technologies in managing cooking times, pick up times and the potential for an app to help assist her in her family life. Yet unlike Mariya, she insisted that she did not check it often, and it hence did not play a major role in managing everyday life. For her, this form of surveillance was in fact infrequent, and hence not determining their family relationship.

The limits of tracking – Between protection and autonomy

The idea that there were limits of tracking was a frequent theme across the data. This is evident in the case of Ines, a mother around 40, who coordinates media events for other parents in Munich and has lived in Germany for 24 years. This case is significant since it points to the theme of autonomy and control, and when surveillance was deemed to overstep a reasonable boundary. Ines had heard about surveillance apps when attending a meeting with a mother who is a facilitator of events with parents that are organised around the topic ‘media consumption and use’. Her son, Anton, attends a special needs school (eine Föderschule) and received a smartwatch when he was 9 years old as she wanted to track his movements. She explains the balancing act she sees as inherent to this, but ultimately how a sense of risk shaped her thinking:

Not that he feels surveilled, we didn’t want this, but on the other hand as a parent you have the anxiety that on the way home something will happen – that is why we decided for this watch (Interview with a mother, November 2022, conducted in German)
Ines bought a watch for Anton since she wanted to know if he reached home safely after his after-school club. When she emphasised in the quote ‘Not that he feels surveilled’, she wanted to make a statement that the primary purpose was not surveillance, but care, and was hence excluding what she thought was intrusive surveillance. I suggest that Ines tried to convince herself that what she was doing was ‘good care’, despite finding ‘surveillance’ morally ambivalent – and hence characterised by moral friction (Shi 2023). She did not want her son to be constantly monitored.

They already started having thoughts about whether surveillance was good when Anton was a baby, and they used a baby monitor which could watch over him at this time. Eventually they decided that a baby monitor was appropriate and beneficial, since their younger child had a health condition, and they were able to keep track of her movements and sounds.

Ines explained that she did not feel particularly safe letting her son walk without supervision in their home area, as there were always police reports that children were attacked by other children, for instance when the children thought that other children were too fat, or just because they used the wrong type of shoes. Having an app attached to his watch hence gave her a feeling that she could always check where he was. Although this form of surveillance could be seen as hierarchical, since, she stated, her son did not like it, when she had called him in his after-school club, it was clear that Ines felt that this form of surveillance had the potential to go too far, and that her primary motivation was to care for her son. She found video surveillance on the public rail system (die Ubahn) acceptable, since she thought this was useful for the police in preventing crime, arguing here that surveillance in the interest of safety was morally good.

When Anton attended grade 2 (around 7 years old), she bought him a smart-watch so she could check where he was on his way home from school. Ines reflected on how much she should track her son, and when it was too much, as she did not want to invade his privacy (Seine Privatsphäre). She did not always want to knock on his bedroom door or kiss him without permission for instance, since her son needed a private space. Yet when she was asked how she saw privacy in terms of her son’s digital life, she did not think he was old enough to have a private life in this regard. She still wanted to have some level of control here, and to have a rough idea about what he sees online. Ines did not like the idea of constant surveillance (ständige Beobachtung). She had only used the app connected to the watch to look where he was twice in the last year, and only when he was late.

Although she wanted her son to have some level of autonomy, she felt safer when her son uses a watch, particularly when he goes on a class trip, and then he is always able to call home if he needs any help. The watch automatically
stops working when Anton is at school, since the use of mobile devices is not allowed. Ines couched her reasoning on these issues within a broader moral framework. She explained that what she was doing was good surveillance (gute Überwachung) since it was not primarily about watching him, but having the reassurance that he is safe when on the move. Watching him all the time would be a step too far and this would turn into surveillance that she conceptualised as bad. Responsible parenting here was about retaining the potential for surveillance, but then being selective in when it was deployed.

**Occasional, exceptional, and horizontal tracking.**

Anja is a 48-year-old mother born in Bavaria who has three children (two daughters who are 12 and 15 as well as an 18-year-old son). The vignette is important for understanding how monitoring might only happen in times of exceptional circumstances, and whenever parents doubted if their children were telling the truth, but wanted to abandon this approach, once trust (das Vertrauen) had been established. Anja felt that COVID lockdowns had taken a toll on her son’s mental health, but after periods of isolation ended, he improved. Tracking her son was hence an exceptional circumstance, but not something she wanted to do once lockdowns had ended. The following case shows how monitoring is not only characterised by digitally following someone in a map, but also calling and keeping in touch by frequent messaging. Anja was the only study participant who was monitored by her daughters without using surveillance apps to monitor them.

Anja’s daughters received mobile phones when they were around 12 and 10 years old respectively, whereas her son received one when he was 15 years old. Her son had experienced mental health challenges, and it was in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, when restrictions started to ease, and people were able to leave the house and visit other people. She was worried about where he was, and whether he could be trusted to go to the places he said he was going to. Her husband would sometimes check the app in the evening to see where he was, and she would feel calmer on hearing his location. Yet Anja did not know the name of the app, since her husband had dealt with the technicalities at the time. Her son was aware that he was being tracked, since he would get a notification sound on his phone, which according to Anja, annoyed him. However, she would never do this with her younger daughters. She trusted that they would always say where they were, and they would often notify her about their whereabouts, before she had even asked them to do this. Tracking her son was an exceptional circumstance [ein Ausnahmezustand], and not something she considered long-term, since they had stopped tracking him. She explained that

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5 Her son did not participate in the research.
she thought it would be strange if she were to track her daughters. She did not want to stalk them, she said, and felt this would be intrusive.

Anja articulated how her phone was her safety. She thought it was difficult to leave the house without it, and she could always notify her children about where she was and let them know in the Family chat on WhatsApp, although she never used the WhatsApp tracking function. While Anja kept emphasising the importance of always being available in the current age, she did not think in principle that constant communication should be necessary.

When I asked her in what situations she did think it was necessary, Anja explained that it was very rare. She could not give any examples, but explained that the word ‘Not’ (being in distress) which is part of the German word for necessary (notwendig) actually described the situation quite well – it had to be an emergency. At the same time Anja thought that being able to contact her children through the phone was comfortable (bequem):

Previously there wasn’t this type of, I don’t know – anxiety, this type of control. I didn’t sense it previously. I think it has increased, even though the dangers have not really got worse, but you always have to be reachable/available – you know you can always get in touch (Interview with Anja, May 2023, conducted in German).

At the end of my research period in July 2023 I managed to speak to Anja’s daughters, Frieda and Heidi, about their views on surveillance apps and mobile phone use in general. They mentioned that their father used to track them when they all had android phones, since these were all linked through the same app, but they could not remember the name of the app, since this was installed on their father’s phone. Both daughters, however, explained how they use Snap-map [a function in Snapchat to geo-monitor others] to track their friends in real time, as well as each other, although they do not want to share their own location, arguing that this was nobody’s business. This indicates a more horizontal form of surveillance (Albrechtslund 2008; Marwick 2012; Andrejevic 2004) characterised by ‘peer to peer’ monitoring. Drawing on Andrejevic (2004) and his concept of lateral surveillance, Albrechtslund (2008) shows how surveillance can be undertaken by individuals rather than corporations, and can be characterised by peer-to-peer mutual monitoring whereby people keep track of family members, friends or romantic interests. While surveillance relations have often been described as characterised by an imbalance of power, horizontal forms of surveillance – sometimes defined as ‘lateral surveillance’ or ‘social surveillance’ (Marwick 2012) are often between peers of a similar social status who monitor each other e.g. on social media.

Both daughters also mentioned the app ‘Wo ist’ (Where is) installed on Apple devices which makes it possible to track other family members. This
could be considered a more hierarchical form of monitoring, whereby parents monitor their children at a distance. However, Heidi engaged in more horizontal forms of monitoring by using this family app, since she monitored her own mother:

When I don’t know where my mother is then I sometimes look at Wo Ist, it is connected, and then I can see oh she is at the choir or something like that, then I know where she is, not that I want to control it or something (Interview with Heidi, conducted in German).

Frieda, on the other hand, found tracking to be useful in cases of emergencies such as when parents could not get hold of them, but also thought that it was slightly ‘stupid’, since she thought her geolocations were private, and not something she wanted to share.

I found it a little stupid, I don’t know, it is not really his business [her father’s], it is my business where I am, but I also find it good, whenever there is an issue, and I am out longer in the evening, there are strange people, and then in emergency situations my parents can see where my phone is. But I also know that it doesn’t really help much. I know of other parents where they are checking their location, and stalking where they are. I know my parents won’t do that (Interview with Frieda, July 2023, conducted in German).

Although both siblings have ‘Wo ist’, and sometimes monitored each other, or their friends via horizontal tracking in Snapmap, they explained that they mostly used WhatsApp or called each other whenever they did not have data. Snapchat was limited by the ‘last seen’ location, hence when someone last had access to mobile data, which was not always precise.

Heidi and Frieda’s form of monitoring their family member’s locations was perceived as less hierarchical than their father monitoring them in real time in the past. Although both Heidi, Frieda and their mother did not know the name of the app that their father/husband used, it was clear that it was also not a major part of their lives. Heidi, however, found it useful to check her mother’s location occasionally whenever she was attending something that she felt she could not disturb, and hence monitored her mother in a horizontal way (Albrechtslund 2008). Heidi was wondering whether she thought geo-monitoring was helpful in an actual emergency. Just like her mother she clearly excluded ‘stalking’ as less caring (as a form of bad surveillance), and not something her parents engaged with, rather it was about helping out in times of need. The children seemed to be more actively involved in geo-monitoring than their own mother, and saw this as a part of making agreements with friends and knowing where they were, or being able to check where their family members were.
Discussion

In the examples above I have demonstrated that parents try to redefine and reflect on what they see as ‘good’ or ‘bad’ care in practice (Mol et al. 2010), and how care is characterised by tinkering. It was clear from my data that parents were not entirely comfortable with the word surveillance (die Überwachung), but were reflecting on this approach, and clearly wanted their children to be more independent (selbstständig) and protect them from dangers. Many parents felt that surveillance (die Überwachung) might be a step too far, especially when it was about reading private messages, or observing someone too often which they saw as a form of ‘bad surveillance’. Although none of the respondents spoke about ‘bad surveillance’ directly, it was clear that the word ‘die Überwachung’ implicitly entailed forms of surveillance they were uncomfortable with – such as stalking, or constant monitoring, and it was these forms of monitoring that they wanted to oppose.

Mariya, Karen, Ines and Anja were all active in configuring and enacting a specific regime of care, that is mediated via family surveillance apps. The appropriate model of care is envisioned through experience and media reporting of the local environment, and the development of a contextual risk profile for their children, that varies with age, location, and the type of journey being undertaken. At the same time, as is clear in the above vignettes, these mothers recognise a moral friction and practical dilemma about what is appropriate digital mediation of family life, that asserts a narrative around where boundaries should be positioned and operationalised, suggesting that these forms of relationships between parents and children were characterised by some form of vertical power – parents making decisions on behalf of their children. This, in turn, is used to justify the form of surveillance practice adopted, as it is located within the moral code of ‘gute Überwachung’, the specific model of good surveillance that is negotiated within each family.

Beyond the four core vignettes discussed above, some other parents in the study also used surveillance apps for either geo-monitoring locations or monitoring media usage, while others were more sceptical of surveillance technologies. These sceptical parents mentioned the importance of children learning independent travel skills and the importance of parents trusting their children – hence not seeing a need to install an app. These positions in turn are also invocations of what constitutes good surveillance and good family practices. Indeed, these differences can exist within a single-family unit, embodying the moral frictions between family members. Karen’s husband, for instance, suggested that he would prefer his oldest daughter to be able to walk independently around their local area, such as going shopping or going to the city, and felt that his daughters were being overprotected, unlike in his own child-
hood. It was clear that Karen, in contrast, found technology to be supporting her in caring for her daughters, although other methods, such as picking up in person was needed for her youngest daughter. Other parents who participated in the research suggested that they could only imagine tracking their children when they were older - such as when they reached puberty, if they started acting against their parents’ guidelines. However, these critical parents put a lot of emphasis on how this was only an anticipated future, and not something they could imagine in the present time, arguing instead that relationships built on trust were crucial, and surveillance mechanisms might be a last resort.

The children who participated in this study were less critical of surveillance technologies and often saw them as helpful in organising their everyday routines, or getting hold of their friends, siblings, and parents. Although some did raise concerns about not wanting others to know where they were, or did not like the idea of stalking someone in an app, it was clear the children found surveillance convenient in locating others, and were hence monitoring their friends of the same status, or a parent to see where they were. Many parents emphasised that surveillance apps and smartwatches gave them a sense of control or would calm them down when their children were on their way, while others were more optimistic of not monitoring their children digitally and trusting that nothing would happen, arguing instead that it was important to nurture children’s independence as a form of care. Although some disagreed on the methods of watching over their children, they still monitored their children’s activities, such as expecting their children to be home at specific times or limiting screen time use. We have seen how, within these families, verbal and non-verbal actions are used to negotiate boundaries around appropriate practice. The negotiations reflect embedded value judgements about risk and responsibility, as well as autonomy and appropriate behaviours. Digital tracking technology, within these families, is not positioned as being in opposition to appropriate care, but is instead a mechanism through which care can be enacted, although these practices need to be carefully guarded and considered, to prevent ‘good’ surveillance become ‘bad’. For these families, surveillance tracking provided a ‘bird’s eye view’, as a responsible but cautious deployment of digital apps as part of the ongoing familiar negotiation of care and control.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have explored how digital surveillance is characterised by moral friction (Shi, 2023) and tinkering (Mol et al. 2010) in which the research participants in Germany were defining their own positions on how they saw appropriate ‘watching over’, and whether they thought digital monitoring had taken a step too far. Theoretically, this paper adds to discussions on morality and surveillance by exploring how moral meaning making is negotiated in
practice through technology (Shi 2023). In many mainstream accounts surveillance has been depicted as a dystopic epitome of totalitarian oppression (Haggerty – Ericson 2000; Shi 2023). While surveillance has often been seen as abusive and threatening – e.g., undermining children’s right to privacy - surveillance is deeply woven into the functioning of everyday life and is an important component of care practices within these families. Care and control are closely entangled, and it is difficult to distinguish between their impulse and mechanisms (Garey – Nelson 2009; Taylor – Rooney 2016; Widmer – Albrechtslund 2021). In the case of digital surveillance technologies and the family, we also see ongoing negotiations between surveillance understood as extraordinary and risky, and surveillance understood as everyday and mundane. The children who participated in this study were less interested in being tracked by their parents except for emergencies, or when they wanted to know the real time locations of their parents. They emphasised the value of being co-present with their friends in real time, as a way of being temporally co-present (for a further discussion of this see Author (Forthcoming). The paper shows, across these families who engage with digital surveillance, that its appropriate use, and the values and practices that determine that, undergo constant negotiation, responding to broader social and personal contexts relating to risk, everyday routine, and judgements on good parenting and good surveillance: an ongoing enactment of the moral code of ‘gute Überwachung’.

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