

“Good mums don’t, apparently, wear make-up”: Negotiating discourses of gendered parenthood in Mumsnet Talk

Abstract

This article explores the discourses and related subject positions that are negotiated by contributors to the discussion forum of a popular British parenting website, Mumsnet Talk. Drawing on analysis of a single thread posted to this forum, I explore the ways in which participants, who present themselves as women and as parents, negotiate dominant discourses of gendered parenthood that position them as ‘mothers’, and often, by association, as the primary caregiver, who is defined and positioned exclusively in relation to children. I also show that contributors use a range of linguistic and digital resources to challenge such discourses, and that their resistance can be facilitated, at times, by the affordances of the forum itself. The potential to connect with a large community of Mumsnet users, for example, is identified as a powerful resource at their disposal. Overall, I find that Mumsnet Talk is a fruitful site for negotiating, resisting and subverting socio-cultural norms and expectations, but that it remains difficult here, as elsewhere, for women to escape dominant discourses that work to position them in restrictive gendered subject positions.

Key words

Mumsnet; motherhood; discourses; subjectivity; online community.

Introduction

This article presents findings from the analysis of a single thread posted to the online discussion forum *Mumsnet Talk* in June 2014. It aims to consider how Mumsnet users explore their place in the world through conversations that take place within this forum, and whether communicating in this context makes any contribution to the options they are able to navigate. These central aims are borne out of an interest in what ‘ways of being an individual’ (Weedon, 1997: 3) are available to women who are parents in today’s society, and how their negotiation of these options is facilitated or constrained by language and context. I am particularly interested in the relationship between gender and parenthood; in what contribution gender makes to ‘being a mother’, or more generally, a parent.

The relevance of gender within this research site is immediately apparent from its title, *Mumsnet*, together with its logo depicting three women in ‘battle’ poses, armed with children or feeding equipment (see figure 1). These linguistic and visual indices of gender point to the pervasive presence of a discourse of ‘gender differentiation’ (Baxter, 2003), which offers dichotomous subject positions along gendered lines; in the case of parenthood, ‘mother’ and ‘father’. However, this article aims to problematise such dichotomous gender relations, including the very category ‘mother’ itself.



Figure 1. Mumsnet logo, from www.mumsnet.com, 09.06.2016.

A feminist poststructuralist perspective (Baxter, 2003; Weedon, 1997) underpins the research that is presented here. Feminist poststructuralism is part of a broader poststructuralist movement that is diverse in nature, but is unified by a concern with language as a social phenomenon, which is ever-changing according to purpose and context (Weedon, 1997). Whilst poststructuralist theory acknowledges that meaning is shifting and unstable, it also draws attention to the powerful forces, sometimes called *discourses*, that work to fix meaning; to construct the social world in specific ways (Foucault, 1972, 1978). The analysis at the heart of this article relies on the assumption that situated meanings, and indeed all ‘knowledge’ surrounding motherhood, and parenthood more generally, are constituted through discourses; that discourses offer particular ways of understanding and making sense of family relations. Furthermore, the ‘ways of being an individual’ (Weedon, 1997: 3), or *subject positions*, that are available to people who have children are constituted through and restricted by discourses, meaning that discourses limit who it is possible to ‘be’ as well as what it is possible to ‘know’.

In sum, this article aims to explore how a group of Mumsnet users negotiate gendered discourses and subject positions, considering whether and how they are defined in gendered terms, and whether and how new possibilities for self-definition can be envisaged through their digital interactions. It also aims to address issues that previous discursive studies of parenting and motherhood in a range of contexts have tended not to emphasise, which are, first, close attention to the role language plays in discursive struggles, and second, explication of the means by which discourses are identified. I pay particular attention to the linguistic and digital resources that are available to Mumsnet users as they work to negotiate discourses through their digital interactions. I will also consider whether the affordances of the Mumsnet Talk forum itself facilitate or constrain users’ opportunities to challenge dominant discourses or position themselves in transformative ways.

Discourses and Feminist Poststructuralism

The concept of discourses, which is central to the theoretical approach taken in this article, revolves around a central nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity (Angermuller, Maingueneau and Wodak, 2014). This means that our sense of who we ‘are’, what we know, and the power to define that knowledge and subjectivity, is discursively regulated. Discourses are therefore difficult to escape and leave individuals by no means free to be, think or act without limit. Some discourses can be described as ‘dominant’, in that they work to maintain the ‘status quo’, whilst other ‘marginalised’ discourses can ‘challenge... existing practices from within’ (Weedon, 1997: 34). Others still may be so marginalised that they can be described as ‘excluded’ discourses, which, by virtue of their absence, are relatively powerless to either inscribe or challenge power relations. However, I do not claim here that discourses can be identified as *universally* dominant, marginalised or excluded: whilst a discourse may be dominant in one context, it may be marginalised in another (see Foucault, 1978). Thus, whilst I identify particular discourses as dominant, marginalised or excluded in my specific research context, I do not claim that they can be universally described as such.

Feminist poststructuralist theory can support the exploration of how discourses can work to fix meanings surrounding gender, sexuality and identity, but also how individuals negotiate and shape these discourses, and their own positions in relation to them. There has been some disagreement, however, as to whether poststructuralist theory can adequately serve feminist interests. Feminist scholars such as Gill (1995) have argued that the two are incompatible because the stable, unified identities, generalisations and global concerns from which poststructuralism withdraws are central to feminism and other political activism. Baxter (2003), however, has responded to such criticisms by pointing out that poststructuralism

questions the very categories and unified identities that modernist feminists have found so useful for exploring and critiquing differences and inequalities between men and women. Poststructuralism therefore cannot support feminism as a cause that universalises and seeks to emancipate *all* women, but it *can* offer a means by which the fluid, unstable and contested meanings surrounding power, gender and identity can be explored (Baxter, 2003). In the study presented here, a feminist poststructuralist perspective supports close attention to the ways in which diverse and multiple meanings surrounding gender and identity are constituted through digital interactions in a local context, with an eye to wider social forces. The explicitly political aims of feminist poststructuralism drive my quest to deconstruct the gendered discourses that work to position women in restricted subject positions and to consider what linguistic resources they can draw on, in order to resist and disrupt these discursive forces.

This article explores Mumsnet users' negotiation of gendered discourses through digital interaction with a particular focus on *subjectivity*, which is defined here as the condition of being a subject of discursive frameworks (Skeggs, 1997). The concept of subjectivity supports a feminist poststructuralist exploration of the intimate relation between discourses and the everyday interactions of a group of women. It is through discourses that preferred forms of gendered subjectivity are offered, and thus power is inscribed, through the constitution of the bodies, minds and experiences of individual subjects (Weedon, 1997). Davies and Harré's (1990) *positioning theory* offers a framework for analysing the constitution of subjectivity through interaction. For Davies and Harré (1990), it is through social interaction that individuals are constituted and reconstituted – positioned – as subjects. They suggest that individuals draw on a range of resources to discursively position themselves and others; attention to these resources is at the heart of the close, qualitative analysis of selected Mumsnet threads that is presented here.

Parenthood, Gender and Language in Digital Interaction

There is a wealth of literature on the theme of parenthood, particularly within sociological contexts, and many of these studies have been conducted from a poststructuralist perspective. For example, Gillies (2007), Lawler (2000), Miller (2011) and Wall (2013) emphasise the restrictions dominant discourses continue to place on parents' lives and the difficulties they may face in their attempts to challenge such discourses. These authors find that 'mothers' and 'fathers' continue to be positioned in unequal roles, with children, and children's needs, remaining at the centre of dominant discourses of motherhood. Lawler (2000) and Miller (2007) emphasise women's agency in these discursive struggles; their capacity to negotiate, manipulate or subvert dominant discourses within their particular contexts, with Miller (2007: 335) suggesting that the construction of (good) motherhood emerges as a complex process of negotiation between 'individual agency, maternal subjectivity, and dominant discourses'. However, these studies do not usually attend to the role of *language* in discursive struggles, or to the complexities of discourse identification and analysis.

The work of Sunderland (2000) and Ellece (2012), in the field of gender and language, addresses both of these limitations to some degree. These analysts focus quite explicitly on the role of language in their identification and analysis of discourses of both motherhood and fatherhood, such as 'Part-time father/ Mother as main parent' (Sunderland, 2000) and 'compulsory motherhood' (Ellece, 2012). Their problematisation of the process of discourse identification and their linguistic approach yields insights into the mechanisms through which gendered discourses operate. The methodological approach presented in this article takes particular influence from Sunderland (2000; 2004), who argues that discourses should be evidenced in the text through close scrutiny of language (see also Fairclough, 1992; van

Leeuwen, 2009). However, I suggest that Sunderland's discursive analysis at times loses sight of some of the key facets of discourses: namely, their central nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity. This is apparent in her description of discourses as 'ways of looking at the world' (2000: 261), which suggests that discourses offer a particular way of seeing things, but disregards the complex mechanisms of power that are bound up with the discursive constitution of knowledge and subjectivity. As a result, I would argue that some of the discourses Sunderland (2000: 268) identifies, such as 'father as mother's bumbling assistant' and 'mother as manager of the father's role in childcare' could be more accurately described as *themes*: as groups of ideas or values that recur in the texts she analyses, rather than *discourses* that constitute their subjects' minds and bodies. I therefore also aim to develop Sunderland's approach, seeking to ground my identification and analysis of discourses more firmly in poststructuralist theory.

Studies of gender and parenthood online from across the social sciences have suggested that the internet has the capacity to support and empower women from a range of backgrounds: by offering spaces in which they can be themselves and express their views honestly (Moravec, 2011), find solace and support in a safe environment (Chan, 2008; Mulcahy, Parry and Glover, 2015) and perform multiple identities (Lakämper, 2015; Petersen, 2015). Further, emerging linguistic research in this area has suggested that online parenting forums such as Mumsnet Talk, and other digital contexts, may support the negotiation and challenge of dominant forms of knowledge around femininity, pregnancy and motherhood (Jaworska, 2017; Mackenzie, 2017a). These themes are consistent with the claims of internet researchers such as Benwell and Stokoe (2006), Danet et al (1997) and Markham (2004), who have suggested that online affordances such as the potential for anonymity can liberate internet users, to some extent, from social constraints. Others, however, have questioned the liberating capacity of the internet. Both Boon and Pentney (2015) and Worthington (2005), for example, suggest that the commercial aims of US parenting sites such as BabyCenter and iVillage can limit the autonomy of individual users and lead to the propagation of damaging, restrictive discourses of femininity and parenthood. Madge and O'Connor's (2006) study of the UK site babyworld upholds claims that the internet can offer freedom, support and empowerment through, for example, the opening up of female-only spaces and the potential for anonymity. However, they also emphasise the persistence of traditional gender stereotypes in babyworld, as evidenced, for example, in participants' persistent self-introductions as the main carer, in a two-person heterosexual relationship.

Several researchers have made similar observations in their explorations of language, gender and sexuality in digital interactions. Hall, Gough, Seymour-Smith and Hansen (2012) and Milani (2013), for example, focus on the ways in which users of online forums foreground certain aspects of their identities over others. Milani's (2013) context is 'meetmarket', a South African online community for men seeking men, whereas Hall et al's (2012) study focuses on an online forum for the discussion of metrosexuality. Both authors find that users of these sites are by no means free from social and institutional constraints. Hall et al (2012) suggest that hegemonic masculinities still permeate interactions on the 'metrosexuality' forum, continuing to influence the negotiation of supposedly 'new', 'modern' or 'alternative' forms of masculinity. Similarly, Milani (2013: 627) finds that users of meetmarket also reproduce and conform to 'normative ideas about what defines a 'man''. These examples raise the much-debated question of whether there is any reason to believe that we are somehow more free from social constraints when we interact online.

Data and Methodology

The analysis presented in this article is taken from a larger study of the discursive construction of motherhood in Mumsnet Talk. The public nature of this forum means that it provides relatively open access to a space in which different perspectives and versions of motherhood may be expressed and explored in everyday interactions. Mumsnet's popularity is a key factor in the selection of this forum as a research site: it hosts over a million visitors each month and thousands of posts are added to the Talk forum each day (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). This site can therefore be seen as a barometer of wider expectations, norms and ideas surrounding parenting and motherhood. The status of the site means that it may even be at the forefront of new and innovative concepts of what it means to be a 'mother'. However, the Mumsnet site does not necessarily offer a wide range of perspectives on motherhood, nor does it seem to be representative of diverse groups of parents. This is because, firstly, it targets individuals who identify as *female* parents. By positioning users as 'mums', the title of this site constrains the parameters for appropriate participation and excludes potential contributors who do not identify themselves in this way. Secondly, Mumsnet is very much a British site; its headquarters are in London, it is written exclusively in English and deals with many themes that are particular to a British context. Finally, demographic data collected by both Pedersen and Smithson (2013) and the 2009 Mumsnet census (see Pedersen and Smithson, 2013) suggest that Mumsnet users tend to share relatively homogeneous traits: for example, many are working mothers with an above-average household income and a university degree. The qualitative study presented here cannot always support such claims about the demographics of Mumsnet users, but I do find that my participants' linguistic choices often emphasise their shared attributes, persistently positioning them as female, heterosexual, middle-class parents.

The first stage of the Mumsnet study involves the construction of a small corpus of fifty threads posted to Mumsnet Talk between April and September 2014, comprising a total of just under 220,000 words. This corpus is constructed through concurrent observation, data collection and preliminary analysis, as consistent with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The basic principle of inductive logic, where theory is developed directly from data (Charmaz, 2014), permeates the design of this study and has allowed me to realise the aim of exploring the 'ways of being' that are available to Mumsnet users without closing down my specific research questions, methodological options and analytical interpretations too early on. This article presents analysis and findings from the second stage of the Mumsnet study, where two threads taken from this larger data set are analysed in detail. These threads are selected through a purposive sampling process, where key terms from the research questions guide the choice of threads for further exploration. For example, many threads are considered for selection because they include naming devices related to the key term 'mother', such as 'mother', 'mum' and 'mummy'. Threads including other categories associated with family relations, such as 'parent', 'father', 'husband', 'wife' and 'child', are also highlighted.

This article focuses on the analysis of just one thread from the Mumsnet Talk forum, titled 'Your identity as a mother'¹. In this thread, contributors directly address their self-perceptions as 'mothers', or indeed, their rejection of this category. The analytical process begins with the coding and categorisation of this thread, guided by the principles of grounded theory and supplemented with close scrutiny of language (Sunderland, 2000). My coding and categorisation of the thread, and subsequent interrogation of the codes and their references, leads me not only to identify persistent themes and recurring linguistic features in these interactions, but also relatively marginalised or absent themes. Like Sunderland (2000: 260, her emphasis), I look at 'what is *not* said, as well as what *is*'.

As the analysis of ‘Your identity as a mother’ develops, I work to identify discourses through a cumulative analytical process that is consistent with an inductive, grounded approach. This process takes me from the exploration of key themes and codes to the identification of ‘potential’ discourses and finally, the naming and analysis of specific discourses. This identification and analysis of discourses is developed concurrently: to use Sunderland’s (2000: 255) words, discourses are ‘both the object and the result’ of my analysis. This process of identifying and naming discourses is neither straightforward, nor objective. Discourses are difficult to pinpoint: they are not isolated entities (Baxter, 2003) and they can be seen to merge, combine and interrelate (van Leeuwen, 2009; Jäger and Maier, 2009: 35). Discourses are also not fixed; they are shifting and unstable, fluid and interpretive, meaning that the boundaries of a discourse will be almost impossible to delimit (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). How discourses are seen and named will therefore depend on my own perspective, and indeed, will reveal something about the position from which I stand, as well as the discourses I name (see Reisigl and Wodak, 2009; Sunderland, 2004).

The process of analysing and identifying discourses in this study is firmly rooted in poststructuralist theory, focusing on the resources that individuals deploy in their discursive positioning of self and other (Davies and Harré, 1990). One specific linguistic strategy that Mumsnet contributors employ in their positioning of themselves and others in ‘Your identity as a mother’ is *double-voicing* (Baxter, 2014), whereby they draw on the words or presumed thoughts of others, both directly and indirectly. Baxter (2014) lists five types of double-voicing, each of which serve slightly different functions. The analysis presented below explores one of these types, ‘dialogic double-voicing’, whereby ideas are debated ‘as if the speaker is both the addresser and the addressee’ (Baxter, 2014: 5). This kind of double-voicing can be realised in a number of ways, one of which is through reported speech, as in Baxter’s (2014: 81) example of a manager using the words ‘you said to me you don’t have time (.) sorry (.) do it right in the first place’ to show she has considered (but dismisses) the views of her colleagues.

The ethical issues involved in the Mumsnet study have been a central concern throughout the research process, and are explored elsewhere in detail (Mackenzie, 2017b). My reflexive-linguistic approach to internet research ethics has involved continuous examination and evaluation of my methods and position as a researcher, including my relationship with participants, in line with a grounded, emergent research design. Using this approach, I have strived to identify some of the norms of interaction and information sharing within the Mumsnet Talk forum, and in turn to anticipate and mitigate potential causes of harm. As a result, I made the decision to contact every Mumsnet user whose words I wished to quote or analyse in detail and asked for their informed consent, even though their contributions were readily accessible to anyone with an internet connection. I also offered to anonymise their usernames, an option several participants were keen to take up. Posts written by those who did not consent, or did not respond, have not been included in this article. This self-selection process has potential implications for my analysis of interaction, because it prevents me from analysing threads in full. However, I consider this to be a reasonable adjustment, since the majority of contributors do give their consent. The ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread remains coherent overall and I have still been able to identify many interactional sequences worthy of close linguistic analysis.

Analysis and Findings: Dominant discourses in ‘Your identity as a mother’

In this section, I identify and examine three dominant discourses at play in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. I have named these discourses ‘gendered parenthood’, ‘child-centric motherhood’ and ‘mother as main parent’. I also point to the presence of a fourth discourse,

‘absent fathers’, which converges and intersects with the ‘mother as main parent’ discourse in this thread. I offer examples to show how I identify these discourses, highlighting the significance of recurring linguistic features such as categories, pronouns and evaluations, which often work to constitute forms of knowledge and subjectivity, as well as linguistic absences – namely, the absence of reference to men as parents or carers.

I identify ‘gendered parenthood’ as an ‘overarching’ discourse (Sunderland, 2000) that incorporates the other discourses set out here. ‘Gendered parenthood’ can also be seen to converge with an overarching discourse of ‘gender differentiation’ (Baxter, 2003): both constitute distinct binary subject positions along gendered lines, although gendered parenthood specifically relates to parental subjectivity. The discourse of gendered parenthood can be identified through participants’ repeated adoption of the category ‘mum’, or its variants, as in the following examples (see bold emphasis):

I’ve been a **mother** for so long (post 4, Loopylouu)
I’m of course a **mum** at home (post 11, EggNChips)
I’m a **mum** to 2 under5s (post 12, IdealistandProudOfIt)
I’m a **mother** of 2 (post 84, Bedsheets4knickers)

In each of these statements, the personal pronoun ‘I’ takes the subject position in the sentence, with the category ‘mum’ or ‘mother’ taking the complement position, so that ‘I’ and ‘mother’ are equated directly. Variants of this statement are common throughout the thread; many participants open their posts with similar self-categorisations. EggNChips’ qualification of her statement with ‘of course’ in post 11 points to the ‘common-sense legitimacy’ (Ellece, 2012) of the ‘mum’ category. So, too, does its persistence across the thread: it seems to be the default subject position for most contributors.

The discourse I name ‘child-centric motherhood’, the most persistent discourse across the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, works to define women’s subjectivity exclusively in relation to children. An examination of evaluative forms in the thread points to the dominance of this discourse. For example, in the following excerpts, participants use the evaluative category ‘good mum(s)’, which not only positions women in relation to children, as ‘mothers’, but evaluates them in relation to their successful adoption of this subject position:

Last night he responded with "but you're a good mum, and that's what's important." (MrsPennyapple, post 66)

good mums don't, apparently, wear make-up: that money/time could be spent on PFB" (Viglioso, post 59)

Both the bald, unmitigated statement ‘that’s what’s important’ (post 66) and the imperative construction ‘good mums don’t...’ (post 59) work to imply that women’s positioning as child-centred mothers is *imperative*; that they do not have a choice but to be positioned in this way. The ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse can therefore be seen here to constitute forms of knowledge surrounding gender and parenthood. It also inscribes unequal power relations, whereby women’s indissoluble relation to children limits the subject positions available to them: who it is possible to ‘be’ as female parents. In the section that follows, I explore one Mumsnet user’s negotiation of this discourse in detail.

The third dominant discourse identified here, ‘mother as main parent’, can be seen to operate quite clearly in the statement:

'I do feel like... I am the "default parent" for DSⁱⁱ' (SploshDuck, post 33)

The 'default parent' category used by SploshDuck, as well as several other contributors, indicates her consciousness of being positioned within the 'mother as main parent' discourse. She implies that this is not necessarily a willing self-positioning through her use of inverted commas, which suggest that 'default parent' is an imposed role, not one of her own choosing. The 'mother as main parent' discourse is felt most persistently in this thread, however, through the continual elision of men and fathers. Not only are there no contributors who identify as male, but participants make very little reference to fathers, or indeed any male adults. One could be forgiven, indeed, for thinking that there *are* no other (male) carers in most participants' lives. For some contributors, this may be the case, although the nature of these online interactions makes it difficult to speculate about the reasons for the widespread absence of men in this thread: it is only clear that there *is* a marked absenceⁱⁱⁱ.

The very title and opening post of the 'Your identity as a mother' thread (extract 1) excludes fathers from this discussion.

Extract 1: Opening post - 'Your identity as a mother' (second person pronouns in bold)

pandarific Sun 01-Jun-14 14:43:17

1. I've been reading a lot of fiction that deals with motherhood and family
2. relationships and I'm curious as to how it changes people, and their
3. view of themselves. Has **your** perception of who **you** are changed since **you**
4. had children? How much of **your** identity is bound up with being a mum? Do
5. **you** think the strength of **your** desire to be a mum/what stage in **your**
6. life **you** had them affected the degree of the changes?
7. For some reason this has come out reading like an exam question - it's
8. not meant to be! Just curious about people's experiences.

In this post, pandarific positions her readers as the sole actors in the process of 'having children', for example through her use of the second person pronouns 'you' and 'your' (see bold emphasis). Together with her repeated use of the gender-specific category 'mum' (lines 4 and 5), this conveys pandarific's presupposition that the identities of interest in this thread are those of *female* parents. This is not surprising, given that Mumsnet is dominated by female users, but as men do tend to be an essential part of the biological creation of children, it can be said that men and fathers are a silent, excluded 'other' here. Most contributors to this thread accept the gender-specific agenda set by pandarific. Most categorise themselves as 'mums' or 'mothers' (although some, as I will show in the next section, identify themselves as 'parents') and they reply to the direct second person address of the opening post, by and large, with a proliferation of first-person singular pronouns such as 'I', 'me' and 'my'. Posts that almost exclusively employ first person singular pronouns, such as cakesonatrains' (extract 2), imply that the female contributors in question have total responsibility for their children.

Extract 2: Post 3 (first person singular pronouns in bold)

cakesonatrains Sun 01-Jun-14 15:07:15

1. **I** think **I** am almost entirely Mum. **My** dcⁱⁱ are still both under 3 so
2. there's a lot of physical Mumming to do, with breastfeeding, nappies,
3. carrying, bathing etc. **I** don't know if it will be less intense when

4. they're older, and **I** might let myself be a bit more **Me** again, but right
5. now **I** am almost refusing to have an identity beyond Mum.
6. **I** am a bit 'old **Me**' at work, but **I**'m part time now so there's less of
7. that too.

Such persistent use of first person pronouns to describe relations that *could* include male carers points to a discourse of exclusion: 'absent fathers'. At the same time, they position women within the 'mother as main parent' discourse, as the main, if not *sole* carers for their children. These discourses frequently intersect in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread, merging with and reinforcing one another at moments such as those analysed above.

Analysis and Findings: Resistance, challenge and marginalised discourses in 'Your identity as a mother'

The dominant discourses identified in the section above do not go unchallenged in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread. In this section, I examine some of the linguistic and digital resources contributors deploy to resist and challenge these discourses, including dialogic double-voicing (Baxter, 2014), a range of interactive strategies and, again, categories, pronouns and evaluations. I suggest that, at times, contributors' resistance is facilitated by the affordances of the forum itself. I also identify two discourses that can be said to compete with dominant discourses of gendered parenthood in this context: 'equal parenting' and 'individuality'.

One contributors' resistance of the dominant 'child-centric motherhood' discourse is evident in extract 3.

Extract 3: Post 59.

Viglioso Wed 04-Jun-14 08:26:39

1. [tagged quote from post 37 - removed^{iv}]
2. This is very interesting as an older pregnant woman (through medical
3. necessity not choice, which might have a bearing on my own perceptions)
4. who is one of the last of her peers to have a DC.
5. I almost notice from the "outside" looking in that some *do* have a
6. certain way - e.g. a book/movement/lifestyle-(*sic*) of parenting that they
7. define themselves by: but it's almost like being part of a tribe, rather
8. than inherently to do with being a mum IYSWIMⁱⁱ? Lots of judgement and
9. looking at the way other people do things and defining by the binary
10. opposite.
11. Can you guess some have been a PITAⁱⁱ already lecturing me (good mums
12. don't, apparently, wear make-up: that money/time could be spent on
13. PFBⁱⁱ).
14. Interestingly one of the most devoted mum (*sic*) in terms of practical
15. things and passionate adoration of PFB I know (of child with a
16. disability requiring lots of care and special input) is very much - and
17. vocally - her "own woman" *with* her child by her side IYSWIM.
18. I'm actually a bit terrified of the "if you have any time for yourself
19. you're neglectful" brigade. As I mentioned above, if anything I'll end
20. up accidentally attached ~~or just spoil PFB~~ due to PFB being a bit of a
21. miracle... but I would like to be *allowed* to be me. ☺

In this extract, Viglioso reproduces the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse quite explicitly through dialogic double-voicing in the statements ‘good mums don’t, apparently, wear make-up: that money/ time could be spent on PFB’ (lines 10-11) and ‘if you have any time for yourself you’re neglectful’ (line 15). Both the imperative and conditional constructions of these examples work to directly position women in relation to their children, as either ‘good’ or ‘neglectful’ mums, according to certain criteria. By reproducing the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse through the voice of others, Viglioso works both to challenge, and to resist being positioned by, this discourse. She further challenges this discourse through her negative evaluations of those who voice it. For example, in line 11 she labels them using the insulting acronym ‘PITA’ (pain in the arse) and later uses the naming devices ‘brigade’ (line 19) and ‘tribe’ (line 7), which carry implications of misplaced, inappropriate force or authority.

The particular affordances of the interactive and digital context come into play, too, in Viglioso’s resistance of the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse. For example, she draws others into the collaborative construction and negative evaluation of the group who represent this discourse through the use of mitigating strategies such as the tag question ‘IYSWIM’ (if you see what I mean - lines 8 and 17) and mitigating qualifiers such as ‘almost’ (lines 5 and 7) and ‘actually’ (line 18), which frame her construction of this out-group as provisional; dependent on the acquiescence of her readers. Viglioso also positions herself within a wider in-group of Mumsnet users by employing digital resources that are pervasive in this context, such as the ‘tagged’ quotation of line 1, the acronyms ‘PITA’, ‘IYSWIM’ and ‘PFB’, the emoji ☺ and the strikethrough text ‘~~or just spoil PFB~~’. Viglioso’s use of these shared resources, together with her interactive, collaborative and negotiational style, contributes to the construction of an in-group who collectively disapprove the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse. When Viglioso adopts such a collective position, her voice can become powerful in this local context. Thus, the potential for interaction and community building within Mumsnet Talk facilitates Viglioso’s resistance of a discourse that is dominant in this context, and negotiation of her position in relation to this discourse.

As well as both taking up and resisting dominant discourses of gendered parenthood in this thread, contributors can be seen to take up the marginalised and competing discourses ‘equal parenting’ and ‘individuality’. They often do so through their adoption of the same linguistic forms as highlighted in the previous section: namely, categories, pronouns and evaluations. For example, in post 11 (extract 4), EggNChips adopts inclusive pronouns to position herself and her ‘DP’ (darling partner) as subjects of an ‘equal parenting’ discourse: as an equal, stable unit who act jointly, rather than a separate ‘mother’ and ‘father’ with distinct gendered subject positions. These pronoun choices contrast with the first person singular pronouns that are dominant in the thread and often mark the absence of fathers, as illustrated in the previous section.

Extract 4: Post 11 (inclusive pronouns highlighted in bold)

EggNChips Sun 01-Jun-14 18:49:33

1. I was ready to become a mum when I had my DS, it was well worth waiting
2. for - **we**'d mellowed as a couple and **both** completed our post grad
3. courses/ worked up to a good place in employment and by the time he
4. arrived, everything felt right.

5. As soon as I became a mum, I was 100% mum and loved it; threw myself in
6. to just that. Then slowly over time, returning to work initially part
7. time, then more or less full time, I'm more "me".

8. I'm of course a mum at home but DPⁱⁱ does equal amounts of parenting and
9. between **us we** allow **each other** to do **our** own things (so I play for a
10. sports team, do stuff the NCTⁱⁱ (*sic*), and regularly organise a meal out
11. with my girlfriends; he's training for a sport thing and also meets his
12. friend about an ongoing project). **We** also try and have a date night or
13. some time on **our** own once in a while. DS has changed **us**, but only
14. priorities, rather than **us** as people.

15. Now DS is 2.8, I'm 50% mum and 50% me, I love my job, love my friends,
16. love Dp, and my sports and there is so much more to me than being a
17. parent.

EggNChips also positions herself within an 'equal parenting' discourse through her use of the category 'parent' (line 17), which makes gender irrelevant to her parental subjectivity. Several other contributors to the thread also categorise themselves in this way, including NotCitrus, in the statement 'I feel much more of a parent than a "mum"' (post 13). Where 'mum' positions participants within a discourse of gendered parenthood, the category 'parent' can position them within a competing discourse of 'equal parenting'. Through her juxtaposition of these subject positions, and the implication that they are mutually exclusive, NotCitrus suggests that they are oppositional and competing.

I identify 'equal parenting' as a *marginalised* discourse in the context of the 'Your identity as a mother' thread both because it is taken up far less frequently than its dominant counterparts and because, where it is taken up, the competing 'mother as main parent' and 'child-centric motherhood' discourses often continue to pervade participants' interactions. For example, when she writes 'DP does equal amounts of parenting' (line 8), EggNChips can be said to approve a discourse of 'equal parenting'. Yet this statement still positions her as the 'main parent', whose contribution is automatically assumed; the standard by which her partner's parenting contribution is compared. Further, EggNChips persistently uses the gendered category 'mum' throughout her post; in fact, she reiterates her self-identification as a 'mum' in the first line of each paragraph (lines 1, 5, 8 and 15). By contrast, her positioning of her 'DP' is *not* equal: she does not categorise her partner directly as a father or as a parent, but rather as someone who 'does... parenting' (line 8). The conflict between EggNChips' overt and explicit attempts to position herself and her partner as equal parents, against her persistent and sometimes subtle self-positioning as the 'main parent' suggests that 'mother as main parent' is a powerful and dominant discourse that can work to position women as 'main parents' even where they appear to make conscious efforts to resist being positioned in this way.

I also identify a discourse of 'individuality' in this thread, largely through close examination of participants' use of first person pronouns. Whilst the use of 'I' alone does not necessarily position participants within a discourse of 'individuality', in the following clauses, where a first-person singular pronoun takes both subject and complement position (see bold emphasis), participants' double-reference to self *does* position them emphatically as individuals:

I am **me** as I have always been (post 12, IdealistandProudOfIt)
I am **me** (post 14, Casmama)
I am **who I am** (post 44, catsrus)
I am totally **me**.. the same me as before.. (post 72, museumum)

This discourse of ‘individuality’ can be said to compete with the dominant ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse. The potential opposition between the subject positions ‘I’ and ‘mum’ can be seen in post 13 (extract 5).

Extract 5: Post 13

Crazym Sun 01-Jun-14 19:07:32

1. Hate being identified as " mum" (*sic*).
2. I was a person before I became a mum and that person still exists.
3. being a mum is just a part of who I am, not the whole.
4. Used to hate the silly bint at nursery who, when I went to collect the
5. Dcsⁿ would say " and how are you today, mum?" (*sic*)
6. I have a name!!!! I am a person!!

Here, Crazym vehemently resists being positioned as a ‘mum’, drawing attention to the way it censors her own sense of self. Her emphatic statements of individuality, communicated, for example, through her use of six exclamation marks in two four-word sentences in line 6, suggest that her claims to individuality are resistant in nature. Further, like Viglioso, she employs dialogic double-voicing to distinguish herself from those who use this category, such as the nursery worker quoted in line 5. However, despite Crazym’s forceful resistance of ‘being identified as “mum”’ and repeated reference to herself as a ‘person’, she positions herself twice as a mum through the relational processes ‘became a mum.../ being a mum’ in lines 2-3. Her own self-positioning as a mum points to the pervasiveness of this category, and again to the dominance of both the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse, and the overarching discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’.

In post 59 (extract 3), as well as reproducing the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse through the voices of others, Viglioso introduces the competing discourse of ‘individuality’ through the voice of the ‘devoted mum’ she describes between lines 14 and 17. The self-possessive ‘own’ within the label ‘her “own woman”’ (line 17) points to a drive for self-determination that mirrors Crazym’s in post 13. Viglioso suggests that the object of her praise is in control of her life; that she is able to determine her own subjectivity and is not controlled by others. In addition, the child described in lines 15-16 is positioned as co-existing *alongside* this ‘devoted mum’, through the prepositions ‘with’ and ‘by [her side]’. This positioning of adult and child points to their co-existence as separate individuals, neither entirely reliant on the other. Viglioso’s *self*-positioning as an ‘individual’ is also implied by her use of the personal pronoun ‘me’ in her closing statement ‘I would like to be *allowed* to be me’ (line 21; her emphasis).

Despite her apparent approval of a discourse of ‘individuality’, however, Viglioso also takes up the competing ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse that she attempts to challenge. She does so through her use of the evaluative category ‘devoted mum’, which, like the ‘good mum’ category, positions and evaluates women in relation to children. In addition, Viglioso’s positive evaluations, expressed through adjectives such as ‘devoted’, ‘passionate’ and ‘special’, and nominalisations such as ‘adoration’ and ‘care’, also position and evaluate this ‘devoted mum’ in relation to her child. Further, Viglioso positions *herself* in exclusive relation to her child, as a subject of the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse, through her use of the verb ‘attached’ in line 20, which implies a strong, unbreakable tie between child and parent.

These analyses lead me to name ‘individuality’, like ‘equal parenting’, as a *marginalised* discourse in the context of the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, both because it is central to participants’ resistance of the dominant ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse, and because

the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse often pervades participants’ interactions even where they make overt attempts to position themselves as individuals.

Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis presented in this article shows that three dominant discourses pervade interactions within the Mumsnet Talk thread ‘Your identity as a mother’. My identification and naming of these discourses as ‘gendered parenthood’, ‘child-centric motherhood’ and ‘mother as main parent’ echoes the claims of scholars such as Baxter (2003), who points to the dominance and persistence of discourses of gender differentiation in a range of contexts, Sunderland (2000), who identifies a dominant ‘mother as main parent’ discourse in parentcraft texts, and Lawler (2000) and Wall (2013), who both emphasise the centrality of children and children’s needs within discourses of motherhood. By closely scrutinising the ways in which knowledge is constituted, subjects are positioned and power relations are inscribed, I have been able to identify some of the linguistic mechanisms by which contributors to the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread are positioned in relation to these discourses. For example, I show that Mumsnet users can be positioned in dichotomous gendered subject positions through the absence of reference to male parents or carers and the pervasiveness of naming devices such as ‘mum’, sometimes preceded by evaluative adjectives such as ‘good’ and ‘devoted’. I suggest that such linguistic presences and absences have acquired ‘common-sense legitimacy’ (Ellece, 2012), in a local context at least, making it difficult for Mumsnet users to escape the forces that work to persistently position them in relation to their children and as ‘default’ parents. The evident frustration of some Mumsnet users at being unable to escape gendered subject positions such as the ‘child-centred mother’ is an important sign that the persistence of these dominant discourses is problematic for many female parents.

‘Common-sense’ linguistic practices such as those identified above must be challenged if diverse groups of parents, including but also extending beyond users of Mumsnet Talk, are to access a range of subject positions. This article has shown that, despite the apparent persistence of dominant discourses of gendered parenthood in Mumsnet Talk, this forum does offer particular opportunities and affordances that can facilitate such challenge. For example, the potential to connect with a large group of Mumsnet users and to draw that group together in the collaborative approval or disapproval of particular discourses is identified as a powerful resource. Through intersubjective alignment, participants can position themselves as powerful in a local context, their resistance of dominant discourses can take on greater force and marginalised subject positions can come to the fore. The analysis presented in this article offers some support to the suggestion that online spaces can be fruitful sites for the resistance and subversion of dominant cultural norms. However, it also supports the reservations of scholars such as Madge and O’Connor (2006) and Worthington (2005), who caution against the assumption that users of online spaces can completely transcend societal forces, norms or stereotypes.

This article offers a significant contribution to scholarship in the social sciences that explores the themes of gender, parenthood and identity. It is also positioned at the forefront of an emerging body of research that focuses on language, gender and parenthood online. It points to the relevance of such explorations at a time when digital interactions and exchanges are playing an increasingly important role in people’s understanding of their place within the social world. I close with a call for further research in this area, including research that explores the experiences of diverse family groups, their interactions in a range of digital contexts, and the relationship between digital and non-digital practices. The approach that has been taken here provides a useful starting point for such explorations: through grounded,

theoretical explorations of language, gender and parenthood online, researchers will be in a good position to problematise and destabilise discourses that persistently work to restrict parents' access to a range of subject positions. They will also be well placed to identify, analyse and support practices at the forefront of social transformation and change in relation to gender and parenthood.

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Notes

ⁱ See Mackenzie (2017a) for analysis of the second thread, 'Can we have a child exchange?'

ⁱⁱ Mumsnet users often employ distinctive acronyms and abbreviations in their posts. The following glossary can be used to interpret all acronyms and abbreviations used in this article:

PFB: precious first born

DS: darling son

DC: darling child(ren)

IYSWIM: if you see what I mean

PITA: pain in the arse

DP: darling partner

NCT: national childbirth trust

ⁱⁱⁱ By repeatedly drawing on the gender binary to categorise individuals, I acknowledge that I am reinforcing dichotomous gender categories, particularly as they relate to parents. However, I would argue that my assumptions, both that contributors to this thread are 'female' parents, and that it is 'male' parents who are absent in this thread, are not unwarranted. I have already noted that the very title of this site is gendered; additionally, I note that I am reproducing the gendered categories used by participants themselves, such as 'woman', 'mother' and 'he'.

^{iv} These references have been removed because the contributors to whom they refer did not consent to take part in my study (see Data and Methodology).

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