THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF MOTHERHOOD THROUGH DIGITAL INTERACTION

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Thesis Summary

This thesis presents a study of digital interactions from an online discussion forum for parents, Mumsnet Talk. It takes two threads from a larger corpus of 50 threads posted to this forum between April and September 2014 and subjects them to close discursive analysis. Taking a qualitative, emergent approach that is grounded in feminist poststructuralist theory, it explores the ways of being – or *subject positions* – that are made available through social practices – or *discourses* – to users of this discussion forum, who present themselves, by and large, as mothers.

Based on detailed linguistic analysis, the findings of this study suggest that dominant discourses of gendered parenthood permeate the interactions analysed here. These discourses often position Mumsnet users in restricted, gendered subjectivities, for example as the primary caregiver, and exclusively in relation to children, even where they try to resist being positioned in this way. However, it is also found that Mumsnet users are able to draw on a range of resources, some of which are particular to this digital context, to resist such discourses, and negotiate ways of being that are innovative and sometimes subversive. Through the process of this research, a new approach to analysing discourses in digital contexts is developed. This approach may be particularly valuable for sociolinguists who wish to study digital contexts, or for scholars whose work is already focused on such contexts, who wish to take a more discursive and/or linguistic approach to their analysis.

This thesis is dedicated to Liz Mackenzie, who showed me that there are many ways of being a good mother.

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List of abbreviations

General List of abbreviations used in this thesis:

BBS: Bulletin Board Systems

CDA: Critical Discourse Analysis

CMC: Computer-Mediated Communication

FPDA: Feminist Poststructuralist Discourse Analysis

FDA: Feminist Discourse Analysis

IRC: Internet Relay Chat

LSS: Languages and Social Sciences

RQ: Research Question

List of abbreviations used in Mumsnet Talk data:

AP: attachment parent(ing)

DC: darling child(ren)

DD: darling daughter

DH: darling husband

DM: darling mother

DP: darling partner

DS: darling son

DW: darling wife

f/t, FT: full time

GF: Gina Ford; child care 'expert' who has written many books about raising children (especially babies)

GP: grandparent

IYSWIM: if you see what I mean

LO/lo: little one

m: months (as in 18m)

mo: months old (as in 18mo)

MN: Mumsnet

NCT: National Childbirth Trust

OP: original poster

PFB: precious first born

pg: pregnant

PITA: pain in the ass

PND: post-natal depression

p/t, PT: part-time

RL: real life

SAHM: stay at home mum

TTC: trying to conceive

v: very

WOHM: working out of the home

yo: year(s) old

yr: year

NOTE: In chapters 5 and 6, particularly long usernames are often abbreviated, as in 'Queen' for 'QueenofLouisiana', or 'Nonie' for 'Nonie241419'. This is consistent with the practices of Mumsnet users themselves, who very frequently abbreviate long usernames.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. Aims and context

This thesis aims to explore what it means to be a mother for users of an online discussion forum for parents, Mumsnet Talk. This central aim is borne out of an interest in what options there are for women who are parents in today's society, and whether, and how, these options are made available, or limited, by language and society. 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. I am interested in how mothers explore their place in the world through conversations that take place on the internet, and whether communicating in this context makes any contribution to the options mothers are able to navigate.

My personal position as a mother of two young children has been instrumental in the conceptualisation and development of this thesis and its aims. Having children means I have been personally subject to the powerful social forces that shape ideals and expectations around motherhood. When I became a mother, it seemed to me that many friends, colleagues and acquaintances suddenly had a new interest in my behaviour and decisions. Many had advice to give, a stance to take, on what made 'good parenting'; what was 'right' for children. This influx of advice and information permeated my experiences and interactions on the internet, particularly within the social network site 'Facebook', of which I am a frequent user. Information and advice was not necessarily offered to me directly in this context, but as I got to know more parents, I found that my home page was increasingly filled with articles, status updates and memes (image/text combinations that are rapidly shared across networks: see section 3.4.2) related to raising children, particularly to decisions around feeding and sleep in the infant years, and to what it means, for example, to be a 'good mum'. I have felt time and again that this advice and information was directed to me, as a female parent – a *mother* – rather than to parents or carers more generally. However, the interactive nature of many social media sites has also meant that I have been able to engage with discussion and debate around parenting themes, for example, by commenting on the words of others or posting links to articles that put forward alternative points of view. My own background and experiences have therefore precipitated my particular interest in whether contributors to an online discussion forum specifically targeted at female parents are able to access a range of meanings surrounding parenting and motherhood, or whether singular or traditional versions of motherhood prevail in this space. My personal investment in the topic of this thesis means that I am also committed to scrutinising my own role as both a researcher *and* a mother, and the relationship between these roles.

This qualitative study is positioned within, and contributes to, the discipline of Sociolinguistics, particularly the field of gender and language, as well as the emerging field of language and digital communication. The principles of feminist poststructuralism drive my aims to explore relations between language, gender and the individual. This theoretical paradigm interrogates and supports the emergence of diverse and multiple meanings surrounding gender, sexuality and identity. It facilitates both close attention to the ways in which meanings are made through language, and rich, in-depth qualitative analyses of digital interactions in a local context, with an eye to wider social forces (see section 2.3).

1.2.   Mumsnet Talk

Mumsnet Talk is a fruitful site for examining the options available to women who are parents. This is an interactive space in which users can share details of their daily lives, make pleas and offers of support and exchange ideas or information. Mumsnet users often engage in discussions within this forum, organised in the form of topical 'threads', in quite an open and intimate way. This is perhaps because, despite this being a 'public' space that is accessible to all, their pseudonymous usernames make them relatively anonymous. Mumsnet Talk therefore provides relatively open access to a forum where different perspectives and versions of motherhood may be expressed and explored.

The popularity and influence of Mumsnet means that explorations of motherhood in this space will likely be influential in terms of wider ideas and expectations surrounding parenting and motherhood, and may even be at the forefront of new and innovative concepts of what it means to be a 'mother'. To give some idea of its status and popularity, Mumsnet hosts over a million visitors each month and sees thousands of posts to the Talk forum each day (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). Endorsement by Mumsnet is highly sought after in commercial and political arenas. Their 'family friendly' awards for 'companies making life easier for families in the UK' (Mumsnet Limited, 2015) and 'Mumsnet best' awards for products with high ranking reviews from Mumsnet users are a testament to the site's authoritative position on who, and what, can best meet families' needs. The site has hosted a number of online discussions with politicians and *The Times* described the 2010 election as the 'Mumsnet election', due to its perceived influence amongst mothers as a key voting group (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013).

There are aspects of the Mumsnet Talk forum that may limit the range of perspectives offered here. Although Mumsnet claims to be a site for 'parents' in general (their tagline reads 'by parents for parents'), it targets users who identify themselves as *female* parents; as *mothers.* The name of the site, for example, employs the gendered category 'mum', and its logo seems to depict three women in 'battle' poses, armed with children or feeding equipment (see figure 1.1). In addition, although

Mumsnet is accessible around the world, it is very much a British site; its headquarters are in London, it is written exclusively in English and, in terms of topical discussion, it deals with many themes that are particular to a British context. Furthermore, demographic data collected by both Pedersen and Smithson (2013) and the 2009 Mumsnet census (see Pedersen and Smithson, 2013) suggest that many Mumsnet users are working mothers with an above-average household income and a university degree. Any insights gained from my qualitative study of Mumsnet Talk are therefore not by any means generalisable to *all* mothers. Indeed, they are not generalisable to all British mothers, or even to all Mumsnet users, as only a relatively small number of interactions from this site will be explored. Rather, this study aims to offer a snapshot of interactions between a specific and relatively homogeneous group of female parents, in a particular digital context, at a particular moment in time. However, the insights gained from this in-depth study may well have far-reaching implications, both for knowledge surrounding the relationship between parenthood, gender and digital interaction in the sociolinguistic discipline, and for parents more widely.

Figure 1.1. Mumsnet logo, from www.mumsnet.com, accessed 09.06.2016.

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Illustration removed for copyright restrictions

1.3. Key concepts

This section introduces and defines the key concepts that will be used to explore the aims set out in section 1.1. Most of these concepts are present in the title of this thesis: 'the discursive construction of motherhood through digital interaction', except for 'subjectivity' and 'identity'. In addition, I provide a glossary of all key terms used in this thesis in Appendix A.

1.3.1. Discourses, subjectivity and identity

This thesis explores Mumsnet users' constructions of motherhood through digital interaction with a particular focus on the poststructuralist concepts of *discourses* and *subjectivity*. Discourses are defined here as constitutive practices, drawing on Foucault's (1972: 42) definition of discourses as 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak'. This definition foregrounds the capacity of discourses to *constitute* or *construct* the social world and the perceptions of 'truth', 'reality' and 'knowledge' that come with it (see section 2.4). My discursive focus facilitates in-depth

qualitative analyses of digital interactions in a local context, whilst maintaining consistent attention to the wider social context of which they are a part.

Subjectivity, as I define it in this thesis, breaks away from humanist notions of the individual as unitary, fixed and rational, and moves towards an appreciation of the multiple, fragmented, contradictory and situated nature of the 'self' (Henriques, Hollway, Urwin, Venn and Walkerdine 1998; Walkerdine, 1985; Weedon, 1997). It is defined here as the condition of being subject to discursive frameworks (Skeggs, 1997), whilst subject *positions* are defined as the 'ways of being an individual' (Weedon, 1997: 3) that are made available by particular discourses.

Subjectivity is closely related to the concept of identity, which has significant credence both in sociolinguistic research and for Mumsnet users themselves (see the thread 'Your identity as a mother', chapter 5). Indeed, studies in the sociolinguistic discipline and beyond have increasingly seen much overlap between the two ways of conceptualising the self in relation to others and in relation to wider society. Identity theorists such as Norton (2000) and Bucholtz and Hall (2005), for example, have also rejected humanist conceptions of the unitary individual, understanding identity 'as a relational and socio-cultural phenomenon' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 585). However, the concept of 'identity', even for these scholars, tends to remain focused on the notion of a *self*, albeit in a relational sense. Within a theory of subjectivity, the focus shifts towards a primary concern with the regulatory forces that enable and constrain individual experience, and how individuals negotiate these forces. Examining the way participants are positioned, and position themselves, as *subjects* of discourses is therefore more consistent with my aim: to explore the ways of being that are available to Mumsnet users in relation to a wider social context, from a feminist poststructuralist perspective.

My exploration of the discursive construction of motherhood in this thesis 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 subject positions 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'. Finally, the power relations that unfold in individuals' everyday interactions *as* mothers, fathers, parents and children, are also discursively regulated. The concepts of discourses, subjectivity, knowledge and power will be further explored in relation to poststructuralist theory in section 2.4.

1.3.2. Constructing gender and motherhood

'Gender' tends to be conceptualised in popular culture as a system for classifying 'men' and 'women' as two relatively homogeneous and distinct social groups (Mills and Mullany, 2011). In addition, the division of people into the categories 'male' or 'female' is often seen to be a natural and essential facet of being human, defined by anatomy and located within the individual (Bem, 1993; Mills and Mullany, 2011). From this essentialist perspective, 'gender' is a noun, something possessed by the individual, so we can say, for example, 'her gender is female'. It follows that, in essentialist terms, 'motherhood' is the condition of being a female parent, that is again defined by anatomy – by the capacity to give birth to and raise a child – and is located within the individual.

Essentialist conceptualisations of gender and motherhood, however, are not consistent with the poststructuralist concepts of discourses and subjectivity that are central to this thesis. The current broad trend of gender and language research, categorised by Mills and Mullany (2011: 50) as 'Third Wave feminist linguistics' and Talbot (2010) as the 'dynamic' approach, tends to move away from such fixed gender polarisation and a view of gender as 'essential' or 'natural', towards an emphasis on gender as a social construction that is defined by and located within society. Much research, discussion and debate within the field has been devoted to problematising these categories, to challenging everyday notions of what 'gender' means, and in particular, the relationship between gender and language (Cameron, 1996). When the concept of gender is distanced from the individual and rooted in social practices and cultural assumptions, gender can be conceptualised as a verb, an ongoing process tied to action and enactment (Butler, 1999; Cameron, 1996; Crawford, 1995). Thus, it can be said that by adopting certain social practices, an individual can 'do *being a woman*', or 'do *being a mother'*. By this token, the concepts of both *gender* and *motherhood* are multiple, changeable and contested constructs (see Cameron, 1996).

In this thesis, I take the position that gendered subject positions are not only constructed by individuals, but constituted, regulated and restricted by discourses. From this perspective, the popular view that 'men' and 'women' are two homogeneous and distinct groups, and the subsequent constitution of gendered subject positions such as 'mother', 'father', 'daughter' and 'son' can be understood in relation to a dominant, pervasive discourse of gender differentiation (Baxter, 2003). Gender differentiation can be described as the nexus of a group of intersecting discourses that positions 'men' and 'women' as fundamentally *separate* and *different,* and subsequently restricts the subject positions that are available to them, working to produce 'inequalities within gender relations' (Baxter, 2003: 33). This thesis aims to discover how motherhood is constructed in relation to such discursive forces at particular moments in and

through Mumsnet users' interactions, and what these interactions reveal about 'norms' of motherhood for users of this site.

1.3.3.   Digital interaction

Interaction is defined here as a communicative exchange between two or more individuals. Many sociolinguists have advocated the exploration of social phenomena through close analysis of the language of interaction. Du Bois (2007), for example, suggests that it is through interaction that individuals position themselves in the world, adopting a particular 'stance' through evaluation and alignment with others. For Bucholtz and Hall (2005), it is not just fleeting stances that are achieved in interaction, but a broader sense of self - of 'identity' - that emerges through interaction. Davies and Harré's (1990) positioning theory offers a framework that is particularly relevant for this thesis because it focuses on the constitution of *subjectivity* through interaction. For Davies and Harré (1990), it is through social interaction that individuals are positioned as subjects. These positions may be fleeting, or relatively stable, and an individual may be positioned in multiple or contradictory ways through the course of interaction, by drawing on a range of resources to discursively position themselves and others. It is significant, then, that this thesis will examine the discursive construction of motherhood *through* digital interaction; this formulation emphasises the central role of interaction in the constitution of subjectivity.

Sociolinguistic studies of interaction have typically explored social exchanges in face-to-face settings (e.g. Coates, 1996; L. Jones, 2012; Pichler, 2008). There is, however, a growing body of literature that examines, broadly, the way individuals position themselves through *digital* interaction (e.g. Deumert, 2014; Hall, Gough, Seymour-Smith, and Hansen, 2012; Katsuno and Yano, 2007; Panyametheekul and Herring, 2007). Digital interaction refers to multi-participant exchanges that are often, but not necessarily, conducted via the internet, and make use of some form of electronic device, usually a computer or mobile phone. There are several key differences between digital and face-to-face interactions. First, participants in a digital interaction tend not to be in close physical proximity (although this may not always be the case; it is perfectly plausible that people within physical reach may interact via an electronic device). Second, interactions usually take place through a written, or more generally, a visual medium (although again, there are exceptions, most notably communication via Skype or Facetime, which use a combination of audio and visual media). Finally, there will be a delay (of variable length) between the production and reception of a message. All three affordances of digital interaction are particularly true of Mumsnet Talk, where contributors are unlikely to know each other outside of this space, there is no option to communicate using audio or

video, and the asynchronicity of the forum means the delay between production and reception of messages is likely to be augmented.

1.4.   Research questions

The broad aims of this thesis, together with my understanding of the key contexts and concepts that are outlined in this chapter, underpin three research questions that inform the early conceptualisation and development of this study:

1.   How is 'mother' constructed as a gendered subject position within Mumsnet Talk interactions?
2.   Do certain 'norms' of motherhood prevail in Mumsnet users' digital interactions?
3.   How are Mumsnet users positioned, and how do they position themselves, in relation to discourses?

Research question 1 focuses on the gendering of the subject position 'mother', which will be scrutinised and problematised in this thesis. Research question 2 is based on my interest in whether what I call 'traditional' versions of motherhood (see section 1.1) will prevail in Mumsnet interactions. I use the term 'norm' rather than 'tradition' here because it more clearly captures the concept that certain ways of being a mother may be more well known, accepted, or widely approved, than others. Research question 3 focuses in on the key concepts of discourses and subjectivity, by asking both how Mumsnet users are positioned, and also how they *position themselves* in relation to discourses. It relies on the notion that individuals can be discursively positioned through the course of interaction (Davies and Harré, 1990). By asking how Mumsnet users are positioned in relation to discourses, I seek to discover some of the mechanisms by which discourses can fix individuals in particular subject positions. However, this question also requires that attention be paid to how individuals negotiate a position for themselves in relation to regulatory, discursive forces.

These are *preliminary* research questions. In chapter 4, I show how they are refined as my study progresses, before outlining the final set of research questions that shape the second part of this thesis in section 4.5. However, the central themes of these questions: scrutinising the relevance of gender and exploring the relationship between discourses, interaction and the individual, remain central as this study evolves.

1.5.   Thesis structure

After the introductory chapter, I set out in chapter 2 to ground this thesis in a poststructuralist, and more specifically, a *feminist* poststructuralist paradigm. In this chapter, I draw attention to the influence of key figures of both poststructuralism (e.g. Bakhtin, 1981; Foucault, 1972, 1978) and

feminist poststructuralism (e.g. Baxter, 2003; Weedon, 1997); these scholars' conceptualisation of the relationship between language, discourses, society and the individual have been instrumental in the development of my aims, research questions and overall approach. I devote further attention to the central concept of discourses in chapter 2, particularly the relation between discourses and power, which has not yet been emphasised, and the ways in which this relation has been conceptualised by different scholars. I draw attention to several methods and approaches for identifying and analysing discourses, such as feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis, and show where this study draws influence, but also departs from, these frameworks.

Where chapter 2 situates this thesis in a theoretical tradition, chapter 3 situates it in an academic tradition. The review of chapter 3 takes in relevant literature from a range of sources, drawing attention, for example, to some important insights from the extensive literature exploring motherhood, as well as parenthood more generally, in the sociological discipline. However, it positions my study most firmly within the discipline of Sociolinguistics, and primarily within the field of gender and language. I explore and position this thesis in relation to developments in this field, as well as highlighting the relative lack of research on the theme of language, gender and parenthood, especially in digital contexts. This chapter also emphasises links to the theory introduced in chapter 2, as well as making connections between different fields, particularly gender and language and language and digital communication.

In chapter 4, I outline my qualitative, inductive and emergent methodological approach. I use this chapter not just to introduce the approaches, concepts and methods that inform my research, but also to chart the ongoing evolution of this study, including my research questions, which are introduced in their final form in section 4.5. I use this chapter to set out the two stages of my study, *data construction* and *identifying and analysing discourses.* I emphasise the central influence of ethnographic and grounded theory traditions throughout the first stage, which includes an extended period of observation and engagement with Mumsnet Talk, and the collection, coding and preliminary analysis of a corpus of 50 threads from this forum. I also show that core ethnographic and grounded theory principles remain central to the analytical process of the second stage, which draws on a wider range of influences for the close, microlinguistic analysis of two selected threads from this corpus.

Chapters 5 and 6 are dedicated to exploring the results of the second stage of my study: *identifying and analysing discourses.* I devote one chapter each to the analysis of two selected Mumsnet threads: 'Your identity as a mother' (chapter 5) and 'Can we have a child exchange?' (chapter 6). In

these chapters, I explore each thread in microlinguistic detail, in relation to the final set of research questions introduced in section 4.5. In both chapters, I identify and outline the discourses at work in these threads, together with the key linguistic and digital resources through which these discourses are identified, and through which Mumsnet users are discursively positioned. As well as analysing the ways in which Mumsnet users are positioned in relation to these discourses, I also begin to identify and analyse interactions between discourses, considering, for example, whether and how discourses can be identified as competing or absent.

Chapter 7 offers a discussion of my findings, with an explicit focus on each of the research questions outlined in section 4.5. This chapter draws attention to the key insights that emerge from my analyses, in relation to the theory, methods and relevant literature cited across this thesis. It begins to consider the implications these insights may have, both for mothers, for parents more generally, and for the academic context in which this thesis is situated.

The final concluding chapter draws together the findings from this thesis, explaining why they are significant and what contributions they offer to the sociolinguistic discipline and beyond. It focuses on my finding that discourses of gendered parenthood are pervasive in Mumsnet Talk interactions, and that they are interdiscursively linked in multiple ways, so that it is difficult for Mumsnet users to position themselves in non-gendered terms. However, I also suggest in this chapter that Mumsnet Talk provides a space in which its users *can* resist dominant discourses of gendered parenthood, and thus negotiate transformative ways of being a mother. Finally, this chapter draws attention to the methodological insights offered by this thesis, highlighting my development of a new approach to the analysis and identification of discourses in digital contexts. At the end of this thesis, supporting documents, analyses and data are provided in an extensive set of appendices. This includes a full glossary of key terms in Appendix A.

I turn first, in the chapter that follows, to further examination of the key concepts of discourses, subjectivity, knowledge and power in relation to poststructuralist theory, and more specifically, *feminist* poststructuralist theory. This chapter will also begin to explore which approaches may be effective for the examination of discourses through linguistic analysis.

Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I outline the key principles of feminist poststructuralist theory that frame this thesis (section 2.3) and contextualise this approach within the broader movements of both poststructuralism and postmodernism (section 2.2). I pay particular attention to Foucauldian poststructuralist theory, revisiting the Foucauldian notion of discourses first introduced in section 1.3.1 and explaining what a particular focus on discourses brings to this thesis. I explore in more detail how discourses will be conceptualised, examine some methodological approaches to the identification and analysis of discourses, and consider how the approach taken in this thesis is situated in relation to these discourse analytic frameworks.

2.2. Postmodernism and poststructuralism

This thesis is positioned very much within a postmodern paradigm. Although postmodernism is not a unified movement, theory, art and research that are labelled 'postmodern' *do* usually share some quite striking characteristics. These characteristics tend to contrast sharply with those of the modernist movement, which emphasises 'universality, generalization, simplification, permanence, stability… [and] homogeneity' (Clarke, 2003: 555). Postmodernism, on the other hand, is epitomised by a spirit of questioning; as C. Butler (2002) explains, the only thing of which postmodernism can be certain is its uncertainty. By contrast with modernism, postmodernism acknowledges the complexity and heterogeneity of the social world (Baxter, 2003; Clarke, 2003), embracing openness and possibility: within a postmodern framework, 'things could always be otherwise' (Clarke, 2003: 560). In line with these core principles, my aims and preliminary research questions interrogate what is often taken for granted, namely the gendering of parenthood (see research question 1, section 1.4), and call for exploration and analysis of the heterogeneous and multiple ways in which Mumsnet users may position themselves, or be discursively positioned (see research question 3, section 1.4).

In more specific terms, this thesis takes a poststructuralist stance. Poststructuralism has been described by C. Butler (2002) as the theoretical branch of postmodernism. Like postmodernism, it does not reference a unified theoretical framework (Baxter, 2003; Weedon, 1997), but common themes can be identified in the work of influential theorists such as Michel Foucault, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan, who tend to be identified as 'poststructuralists', though they may have rejected this categorisation themselves (Belsey, 2002; C. Butler, 2002). For poststructuralists, the world is created *through* language, rather than merely labelled or organised by language. Poststructuralism's attention to language and meaning can be

attributed largely to the influence of Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), who, Weedon (1997: 22) explains, established poststructuralism's 'founding insight… that language, far from reflecting an already given social reality, constitutes social reality'. Language, by this token, can be seen to close down the multiple possibilities of the postmodern world. It belongs, Saussure (1974) explains, not only to the individual, but also to society, and thus can both facilitate and restrict the ways in which individuals exercise thought and speech. Where poststructuralism departs from the structuralism of Saussure, however, is in its rejection of the notion that language can be viewed as a pre-determined, fixed bank of signifiers; what Saussure (1974) calls *langue*. Instead, poststructuralists tend to treat language as a social phenomenon; not fixed or static, but plural, heterogeneous and ever changing according to purpose and context (Weedon, 1997). Language is also, and importantly, a vehicle through which dominant social norms can be resisted and transformed (Weedon, 1997). Language, for poststructuralists, therefore both constrains and empowers, restricts and enables. Given this central concern with language, society and meaning, it is not surprising that poststructuralist theory has been particularly prevalent in recent years within sociolinguistic fields such as gender and language (see section 3.2).

The work of the poststructuralist theorist Michel Foucault (especially 1972, 1978) has been particularly influential in the development of this thesis. What a Foucauldian perspective brings to this study is an appreciation that, whilst social life is complex, heterogeneous and replete with possibilities, and whilst meaning is shifting and unstable, there exist, at the same time, powerful forces that work to fix meaning; to construct the social world in specific ways. These forces are difficult to escape and leave individuals by no means free to be, think or act without limit. We are, as Foucault (1989: 197) puts it, 'a society which is essentially defined by the norm'. These 'norms' are constituted through *discourses;* regulated groups of statements that control our lives, the way we see the world, who we 'are' completely (Foucault, 1972). It is therefore difficult, if not impossible, to exist outside of discourses (see sections 1.3.1 and 2.4). Foucault's central concern has been with the question of how some discourses have shaped and created meaning systems, for example, in terms of the historical social construction of madness (1967), punishment (1977) and sexuality (1978). In these texts, Foucault repeatedly turns to the question of how particular systems have gained the status and currency of 'truth', and have subsequently come to dominate how we define and organise both ourselves and our social world, whilst other discourses have become marginalised and subjugated, yet potentially offer sites where hegemonic practices can be contested, challenged and resisted. Foucault's (1972) emphasis on silenced, suppressed and marginalised voices, as well as those that are dominant, institutional and oppressive, allows for the possibility that norms, or rather

discourses, can be negotiated, contested or resisted; that there is always the potential for challenge, subversion and multiplicity.

Foucault is not the only poststructuralist theorist to scrutinise the operation of power through regulated statements. Bakhtin's (1981) work is similar in this respect, though he conceptualises such groups of statements as 'languages'. Bakhtin's (1981) neologism 'heteroglossia' encapsulates the countless 'languages' that exist at any given (social) moment in time. According to Bakhtin (1981), in order to speak, one must interact with existing languages, and it is not possible to speak outside of these languages, in the same way that it is not possible to speak outside of discourses. Bakhtin's (1981: 276) striking image of the intention of the word 'passing through' a social atmosphere before reaching its meaning captures the essence of this dialogised process. Hence, a speaker may utter the words "look at that boy" – and find the object, 'boy', 'already… overlain with qualifications… already enveloped in an obscuring mist-or… by the "light" of alien words that have already been spoken about it'. This is what gives language its 'already uttered quality' (1981: 321). Bakhtin's conceptualisation of the dialogised process resonates with both Saussure's (1974: 116) claim that 'the value of just any term is accordingly determined by its environment' and Foucault's (1972: 27) insistence that 'all manifest discourse is secretly based on an "already-said"'. Bakhtin's imagery is highly visual; figure 2.1 shows my attempt to make sense of the dialogised process.

Figure 2.1. Bakhtin's concept of dialogised heteroglossia (adapted from Bakhtin, 1981: 277)
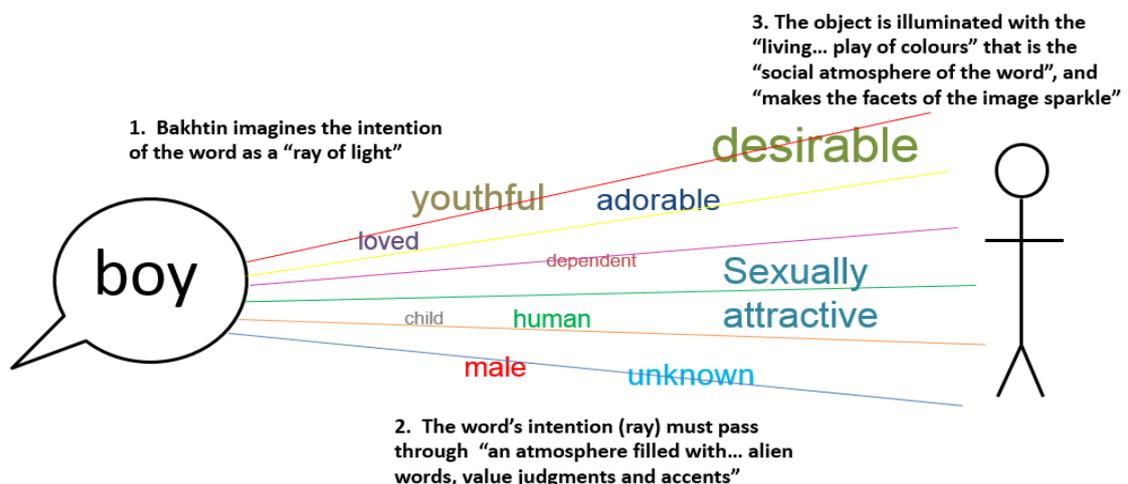
Bakhtin (1981: 321) does claim, however, that despite the 'already uttered quality' of language, it is still possible to construct an individual style by selectively adopting the voices of others, and sometimes manipulating them for one's own ends. An individual and potentially subversive voice can therefore be created *through* the voices of others. Just as Foucault supports silenced and

suppressed voices, Bakhtin's heteroglossia supports non-official, marginalised, oppressed and peripheralised voices, and focuses on the interactions between these multiple voices (Baxter, 2003). Through his emphasis on competing or marginalised points of view, Bakhtin, like Foucault, invites the exploration of challenges to dominant forces and emphasises the possibility of multiplicity and individuality within regulated frameworks. Bakhtin and Foucault's recognition of the potential for individual resistance, subversion and creative manipulation of dominant societal forces is important for this thesis. My belief that individual speakers do have resources at their disposal to manipulate, negotiate and resist discursive forces leads me to ask not just how Mumsnet users are positioned in relation to discourses, but also how they position *themselves* in relation to discourses (see research question 3, section 1.4). This question invites recognition and exploration of multiple, marginalised and peripheral perspectives in Mumsnet Talk interactions.

By adopting a broadly Foucauldian poststructuralist perspective, I take the position in this thesis that the social world is discursively constituted and regulated, and that, importantly, it is through *language* that discourses can be seen to operate; to restrict and control what it is possible to know and who it is possible to be. But it is also through language that a range of voices can be heard; that individuals can position themselves in relation to discourses, that discourses can be negotiated, approved or contested, and that new or transformative discourses can emerge. It is therefore through an explicit focus on language that the relationship between discourses, individual subjectivity and key constructs such as gender and motherhood will be explored in this thesis.

2.3. Feminism and feminist poststructuralism

The dual and intersecting influences of feminism and poststructuralism pervade this thesis. The concept of feminism, in a western context at least, originates with the suffragette movement, which emerged in the late nineteenth century in the UK and the United States (Mills and Mullany, 2011). This movement sought to address institutional inequality between men and women, focusing on women's right to vote. A concern to emancipate women as 'victims of a patriarchal system' (Jule, 2008) has remained central to many forms of feminism. However, the concepts of 'emancipation' and 'patriarchy' have been questioned in recent years, for example by Baxter (2003), who points to the simplistic assumption of universality inherent in the notion of emancipation. Mills and Mullany (2011: 14), similarly, question whether 'patriarchy', that is, 'a social system which operates in the interests and benefit of men rather than women', is still a useful term for feminists, as it assumes 'a certain stability' that makes it 'more difficult to challenge and transform'.

From a poststructuralist perspective, the feminist concern with power relations is likely to be manifested as a concern with the disruption and transformation of existing power relations, with 'the opening up of all social ways of being to all people' (Weedon, 1997: 18) and with the gradual erosion of grand narratives (Baxter, 2003; C. Butler, 2002). Feminist poststructuralism interrogates the very concepts of gender, sexuality and identity themselves, questioning what it means to be, for example, a woman or a man, both or neither, straight, gay or bisexual, feminine or masculine (Mills and Mullany, 2011; Weedon, 1997). It examines the ways in which individuals are defined by these terms, and 'how we might begin to redefine them for ourselves' (Weedon, 1997: 1). In keeping with Bakhtinian and Foucauldian poststructuralist theory, feminist poststructuralism focuses on resistance, struggle, difference and diversity and thus supports the emergence of new or transformative meanings; meanings that are not expected to replace existing norms or generate new grand narratives, but to contribute to a rich diversity of ways of being (Weedon, 1997). Both Baxter (2003) and Weedon (1997) also place language at the heart of feminist poststructuralism, suggesting that through language, new possibilities can be envisaged and individuals have the opportunity to construct discursive positions that may be transformative in nature.

There has been some disagreement, however, as to whether poststructuralist theory can 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 (see section 3.2.3). Baxter (2003), however, has responded to such criticisms by pointing out that they are based on modernist suppositions, which are at odds with poststructuralist theory. Poststructuralism questions the very categories and unified identities to which Gill (1995) refers, and which 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 (Baxter, 2003). What poststructuralism *can* offer feminism, however, is the means by which the fluid, unstable and contested meanings surrounding power, gender and identity can be explored (Baxter, 2003).

The political, interrogative and transformative aims of feminist poststructuralism drive the aims of this thesis: to explore and problematise the relationship between gender, language and individual subjectivity, and to contribute to the identification and disruption of dominant social forces that may work to fix and restrict the subject positions that are available to Mumsnet users in their digital interactions.

2.4. Discourse, discourses and discourse analysis

The term 'discourse' has been used and defined in different ways across a wide range of academic disciplines, so it would be ambiguous to use it without a clear explication of its meaning in this context. Two broad definitions of 'discourse' are identified here. First, there is the linguistic conceptualisation of discourse, as 'language in use' (Angermuller et al, 2014; Schiffrin, 1994; van Dijk, 2011). Second, there is the socio-historical conceptualisation of discourse, as a collection of social practices (Angermuller et al, 2014; Reisigl & Wodak, 2009). The distinction between the two will be marked here, following Lemke (1995), by the use of the mass noun *discourse* to refer to 'language in use', and the count noun *discourses* to refer to social practices. It is the latter type of discourses that are of particular interest here, defined as practices that constitute the social world and the perceptions of 'truth', 'reality' and 'knowledge' that come with it (Foucault, 1972, 1978). Examining the *discursive* construction of motherhood in Mumsnet Talk supports the dual local/global focus of this thesis, whereby I pay attention to the wider social forces that are at work in local constructions of motherhood (see sections 1.3.1 and 3.2.3).

2.4.1. The central nexus of discourse theory: Knowledge, power, subjectivity

Describing discourses as 'constitutive practices' is enough to distinguish the Foucauldian notion of discourses from other definitions and to convey a sense of their powerful capacity to construct and shape social meanings and realities. But a fuller explanation of what discourses are and how they operate is needed in order to identify and analyse the discourses at work in everyday practice. I elaborate on the nature of discourses here by focusing in on the interrelation between knowledge, power and subjectivity. Angermuller, Maingueneau and Wodak (2014) suggest that this triad forms the central 'nexus' of discourse theory. I reproduce their diagram, which highlights the balanced interplay between these three elements, in figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2. The triangle of discourse theory: Power, knowledge, subjectivity (Angermuller et al., 2014: 6).
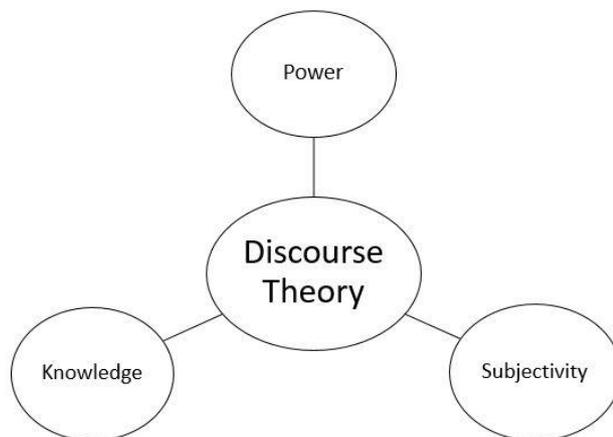
It is the central nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity that makes discourses different from, say, 'themes' or 'ideas', terms I also use in this thesis. Themes, for example, share with discourses the property of being a set of recurring statements, or *group* of statements (see section 4.3.5). That group of statements is only a discourse, however, if it constitutes knowledge, positions subjects and inscribes power relations. What this means is that our sense of who we 'are', what we know, and the power to define that knowledge and subjectivity, is regulated *through discourses*. The concept of subjectivity (see section 1.3.1) is a particularly important element of this triad here, because one of the primary aims of this thesis is to explore the 'ways of being an individual' (Weedon, 1997: 18), or in other words, the *subject positions*, that are available to, and negotiated by, users of Mumsnet Talk. Together, the nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity provides a focus for the analyses at the heart of this thesis.

However, the relationship between knowledge, power and subjectivity is a problematic one, raising questions about the degree to which discursive forces constitute the lives of individual subjects. Any understanding of this relation will depend, to a degree, upon the analyst's conceptualisation of power. Power, as it is understood by many critical discourse analysts, for example, operates along quite a dichotomous axis and is principally concerned with *control.* So for van Dijk (2008: 65, his emphasis), social power is defined:

> in terms of the *control* exercized by one group or organization (or its 'members') over
> the *actions* and/or the *minds* of (the members of) another group, thus limiting the
> freedom of action of the others, or influencing their knowledge, attitudes or ideologies.

Power is conceptualised in this statement as something one either has, or does not. Other critical discourse analysts such as Reisigl and Wodak (2009) and Wodak and Meyer (2009) approach power in similar terms, as a relation of difference and asymmetry; dominance and subordination; 'the possibility of having one's own will within a social relationship against the will or interests of others' (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 88). Within this conceptualisation of power, discourses can be seen as part of a system whereby the knowledge and subject positions available to subordinated groups are controlled by dominant groups.

Poststructuralist theory, however, tends to be sceptical of any concept that relies on stark contrast or rule. Foucault (1978: 102), for example, does not see power as a relation of dominance versus subservience, as the above definitions imply, but as a relation that is complex and shifting: 'a multiple and mobile field of force relations, wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced'. Bakhtin (1981), too, highlights interactions between multiple voices without privileging one voice over another, thus emphasising the complex interplay between discursive elements, rather than binary power relations. In line with a broadly poststructuralist, and more specifically feminist poststructuralist approach, the relationship between knowledge, power and subjectivity in this thesis is understood in terms of relations that are plural and competing (Baxter, 2003; see section 2.4.3). Discourses are not understood to be straightforwardly more or less powerful, dominant or marginalised, accepted or excluded, but constantly shifting in relation to one another (Foucault, 1978). This conceptualisation of knowledge, power and subjectivity has been particularly productive for feminist theorists who wish to move away from binary, 'top-down' conceptualisations of power to describe relations between men and women (Mills, 2003; Thornborrow, 2002); to move away from a view of power that positions women as oppressed and constrained within a patriarchal system, to one that can 'giv[e] rise to new forms of behaviour' (Mills, 2003: 33).

Nevertheless, it is recognised in this thesis, in line with Foucault's view, that some discourses have gained the status and currency of 'truth', and thus dominate the ways in which we can define and organise both ourselves and our social world. In other words, certain discourses can become synonymous with popular conceptions of what is 'everyday' or 'normal', acquiring a 'very special kind of obviousness' (Althusser, 1979: 139) that comes to be seen as just *common sense.* Ellece (2012: 89) describes this 'obviousness' as 'commonsense legitimacy'. Discourses that have acquired such commonsense legitimacy can be described as 'dominant', and they work to marginalise other discourses that are not institutionally legitimised and/or widely recognised as the 'norm'. Although some discourses may be broadly 'dominant' or 'marginalised' in a particular culture or context,

however, they cannot necessarily be identified as *universally* dominant or marginalised; it cannot be assumed that certain discourses will *always* prevail over others. As Foucault (1978: 100) puts it:

> we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse; or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies.

Thus, discourses, and the subjects they produce, may be powerful at one moment, but relatively powerless at another, or may even be simultaneously powerful *and* powerless. Baxter's (2003) emphasis upon *competing* discourses, that tend to be positioned, and to work against one another at a particular moment, is a useful way of conceptualising oppositional power relations between discourses without dichotomising the powerful, or dominant, versus the powerless, or marginalised. Her analysis of classroom interaction illustrates the often shifting power relations of competing discourses (see section 2.4.3).

2.4.2. Identifying discourses

Discourses have so far been explored in rather abstract terms. They are 'forces' and 'practices'; they 'inscribe power' and 'position subjects'. But how? And what do these processes look like? These are difficult questions to answer, but by pinpointing discourses, and especially by unpacking the mechanisms through which they operate, discourses can, in a sense, be demystified. Identifying discourses, however, is not a straightforward operation. Discourses are not isolated entities (Baxter, 2003). They merge, combine and interrelate (van Leeuwen, 2009), becoming 'intimately entangled with each other' to form a 'giant milling mass' (Jäger and Maier, 2009: 35). It is likely that many discourses will come together in any given text, and in fact it may be difficult to distinguish individual discourses at all because they are interconnected and intertextually linked (Baxter, 2003). Such complex interrelation is described by Fairclough (1992) and Sunderland (2004) as 'interdiscursivity'. 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). It would seem, then, that there *are no* concrete, clearly defined, easily identifiable discourses. Similarly, it will never be possible to pinpoint all the discourses that are in circulation at any one given time. It would be like trying to count the grains of sand on a beach; by the time the searcher had completed their task, the sands would have shifted in unpredictable ways and individual grains would have changed shape. In a sense, analysts can immortalise discourses by identifying and writing about them. But over time, text, culture or speaker, the nature of discourses, as they operate in societal practices, will change. How discourses are seen and named will also depend on the analyst's perspective, and indeed, will tell us something about the namer, and the position from which they stand, as well as the discourses they name (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009; Sunderland, 2004).

It is perhaps because of the complex, unstable and shifting nature of discourses that the mechanisms for identifying them are so rarely made explicit in an otherwise extensive body of discourse studies literature from across the social sciences. For example, sociologists exploring the theme of motherhood have named a range of discourses of parenthood such as 'intensive mothering' and 'child-centredness' (Wall, 2013), 'equality' and 'involved fatherhood' (Miller, 2011), without making the means by which they came to name these discourses explicit (see section 3.3). Readers are consequently relying on the author's, as well as their own, intuitions and assumptions in order to understand what it is that reveals the presence of these discourses. Intuitions may well have a place in the identification and analysis of discourses, but such analyses are unlikely to move beyond a certain level of complexity. They are unlikely to be able to reveal very much, for example, about exactly how discursive forces operate in social practice, how they merge and combine and, importantly, how they can be negotiated and challenged.

Those who do address the issue of discourse identification directly tend to emphasise the limitations of any effort to outline methods for identifying discourses. The work of Sunderland (2000, 2004), for example, is often cited in relation to discourse identification within the field of gender and language and the sociolinguistic discipline more widely, yet she insists that discourses cannot be recognised 'in any straightforward way' (Sunderland, 2004: 28). Indeed, the very nature of poststructuralist thought encourages the analyst to embrace multiple perspectives; to resist prescription and claims to 'truth' or 'objectivity' through 'scientific', 'precise' methodologies (L. Graham, 2005). To offer, or follow, a prescribed, definitive method for identifying discourses would therefore, in many ways, be counter to poststructuralist principles. However, several discourse analysts *have* offered some guidance, not by *pre*scribing specific methods, but *de*scribing their methods for discourse identification in detail. For example, van Leeuwen (2009) focuses on a text's representation of actors, actions, times and places, through markers such as lexical choice and verb type. Baxter (2010) examines lexical choices, turn taking and verb tense whilst Reisigl and Wodak (2009) locate what they call 'discursive strategies' in a wide range of specific linguistic devices such as metaphor, collocation, verbs, nouns and adjectives. These discursive strategies include 'nomination', 'predication', 'argumentation', 'perspectivization' and 'intensification' (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 94). Some critical discourse analysts (e.g. Reisigl and Wodak, 2009; van Leeuwen, 2009) have used visual resources such as tables and other diagrams to chart and compare the discursive strategies deployed in a range of texts. In doing so, they can see at a glance how a particular text defines, describes or conceptualises the topic at hand, who or what is foregrounded, and so on. Precisely which linguistic features these scholars emphasise is influenced by a range of factors. For example, Baxter's (2010) attention to turn taking practices is particularly appropriate for the analysis of spoken interaction.

Fairclough's (1992) focus on transitivity, theme and modality reveals his commitment to the systemic functional linguistic approach. Such variation in discourse analysis is necessary because, as Reisigl and Wodak (2009: 83-89) explain, the 'linguistic realizations' of a discourse will be 'context-dependent', and their theoretical and methodological choices will 'depend on the specific problem' they investigate. What these scholars have in common is their systematic evidencing of discourses through close scrutiny of language. This is based on the principle that, although we may not be able to 'see' an entire discourse on the page, what we *can* see are the language practices through which discourses operate. It is through language, after all, that discursive struggles are acted out (Mills, 2004), and so it is through an analysis of language that discourses can be reconstructed (Sunderland, 2004)*. By identifying and naming discourses, and deconstructing the ways in which they operate through language, the analyst can lay bare what is often hidden, assumed or unspoken.

2.4.3. Discourse analysis

The term 'discourse analysis' captures a group of analytical approaches that focus centrally on discourse (Mills and Mullany, 2011). But because 'discourse' can have many meanings, discourse analysis actually covers a diverse range of methods. Under this umbrella term, for example, Schiffrin (1994) includes speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, the ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis and variation analysis. Cameron (2001) explores similar approaches, as well as adding critical discourse analysis. In this section, I explore some broadly poststructuralist approaches to discourse analysis that have been influential in the development of this thesis, including the work of scholars who adopt a feminist approach to discourse analysis in a sociolinguistic context, such as Baxter (2002, 2003) and Sunderland (2000, 2004). These approaches all define 'discourses' in a way that is broadly consistent with the way they are defined in this thesis.

One approach that has dominated poststructuralist discourse analytical studies in the twenty-first century is critical discourse analysis (CDA). The work of critical discourse analysts has been influential in the development of my understanding of discourses (section 2.4.1) and the difficult question of how discourses can be identified (section 2.4.2). This thesis is aligned with a CDA approach in two important respects. First, CDA research is *applied* research. It focuses on problems, rather than an allegiance to particular disciplines, methods or theories (van Dijk, 2009). The feminist aims of this thesis - to interrogate the concept of gender and explore relations between language, gender and power in Mumsnet Talk interactions (see section 1.1 and 2.3) - are therefore consistent to some degree with CDA, as is my qualitative, emergent approach (see section 4.2). Second, CDA has a particular concern with *power relations* (see section 2.4.1)*, which are largely neglected by some poststructuralist discourse analysts (e.g. Sunderland, 2000; 2004). Further, CDA scholars have

outlined valuable strategies by which researchers can pinpoint such power relations through linguistic analysis. Reisigl and Wodak (2009), for example, show how a focus on discursive strategies such as perspectivization, mitigation and intensification can help analysts to recognise the way speakers and authors discursively position themselves, and others, as relatively powerful, or powerless. However, as noted in section 2.4.1, critical discourse analysts have often conceptualised power in binary terms. The prevailing concern in many CDA studies with enabling people to 'emancipate themselves from forms of domination' (Wodak and Meyer, 2009: 7) positions some subjects as universally powerless and serves an emancipatory agenda that is incompatible with poststructuralism, and particularly *feminist* poststructuralism as it has been defined here (see sections 2.2 and 2.3). Such a dichotomous conceptualisation of power, I would suggest, restricts the analytical focus, precluding subtle analyses of multiple and shifting power relations.

A second poststructuralist approach to discourse analysis that will be explored here is Baxter's (2002, 2003) feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (FPDA). FPDA, a methodological vehicle for the feminist poststructuralist theory outlined in section 2.3, shares a number of similarities with CDA. Like CDA, FPDA serves political goals: it has a feminist quest 'to represent the complexities and ambiguities of female experience' (Baxter, 2003: 56). FPDA also, like CDA, pays particular attention to the theme of *power,* seeking to analyse the ways in which discourses constitute power relations in any given text or context. Baxter (2003), however, does not conceptualise the interplay of power as a simple relation of domination and subordination. Rather, Baxter's (2002, 2003) FPDA focuses in on the complex interplay of discursive power relations, whereby individuals may be situated as powerful at one moment, but powerless the next, or simultaneously adopt both positions in relation to competing discursive elements (see section 2.4.1).

An example of Baxter's (2003) analysis of classroom interaction illustrates her approach. In the context of an English GCSE speaking and listening assessment, Baxter's (2003) analysis shows how a range of students are positioned as relatively powerful or powerless, and sometimes both, in relation to the competing discourses of approval (subdivided into peer and teacher approval), gender differentiation and collaborative talk. For example, she compares the discursive interplay of power and subjectivity between two female students: Anne, who seems to receive preferential treatment and a good deal of positive feedback from the teacher, and her classmate Rebecca. Baxter (2003) suggests that Anne is seen to be relatively *powerful* compared with Rebecca in relation to the discourse of teacher approval, but relatively *powerless* in relation to peer approval, because approval by the teacher is perceived as 'boffiness', and 'boffins' are generally not as popular with their peers. Both students, due to their adoption of a collaborative, supportive interactional style in

discussions with their peers, can be positioned as reasonably powerful in relation to the discourse of collaborative talk, which is highly valued in terms of the criteria for the speaking and listening assessment. At the same time, Baxter (2003) suggests, this power might be diminished within a discourse of gender differentiation, which constitutes female interlocutors as inherently good listeners, thus de-emphasising any personal skill or effort on the students' part. Baxter's conceptualisation of power is important for this thesis, which in keeping with FPDA analyses discourses, and the discursive relations between knowledge, power and subjectivity, as shifting, multiple and potentially competing.

A third discourse analytic approach that has significantly influenced the theoretical and methodological development of this study originates with the work of Sunderland (2000, 2004). Sunderland's (2004) analysis of 'gendered discourses' has been influential in the field of gender and language, and also in discourse studies more widely. Though she does not give a name to her methodology, Mills and Mullany (2011) use the term feminist discourse analysis (FDA) to describe her approach. This form of discourse analysis shares with FPDA a particular concern with the identification of discourses that foreground the relevance of gender and the analysis of the ways in which these discourses are taken up, negotiated and challenged in specific contexts.

In her analysis of parentcraft texts, Sunderland (2000) works to identify discourses by first identifying recurring linguistic items, such as 'play', 'fun', 'help' and 'share'. Through her scrutiny of the way these processes are attributed to male and female parents, she begins to reveal some of the gendered discourses at work in these texts. So, she suggests, the 'Part-time father/ Mother as main parent' discourse 'is realized through the recurrence of *help*', which is largely attributed to fathers, and the 'Father as baby entertainer' discourse 'is realized through recurrences of *play, fun and enjoy*', again attributed largely to male parents (Sunderland, 2000: 265). This attention to recurrences and repetitions is aligned with van Leeuwen's (2009) approach to the 'reconstruction' of discourses. As is consistent with Foucauldian poststructuralist theory, Sunderland (2000) pays attention not only to presences in the text, but also to absences. So, for example, the *absence* of the linguistic items 'share' and 'paternity leave', as well as the backgrounding of fathers through lack of specific reference to men as parental subjects, also reinforce what she identifies as a 'Part-time father/ Mother as main parent' discourse. Sunderland (2000: 255) develops her analysis of the ways in which discourses operate and her identification of the discourses themselves concurrently, so that discourses are 'both the object and the result' of her analysis.

Sunderland's FDA, however, can be distinguished from both CDA and FPDA by its relative lack of commitment to poststructuralist theory. I would suggest that Sunderland's discourse analysis at

times loses sight of some of the very facets of discourses themselves: namely, their central nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 2.4.1). 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 does not capture 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 'specific' discourses that Sunderland (2000: 268) suggests work to 'shore up' the overarching, dominant 'Part-time father/ Mother as main parent' discourse, such as 'Father as mother's bumbling assistant' and 'Mother as manager of the father's role in childcare', would be more accurately described as *themes:* as groups of ideas or values that recur in the texts she analyses, rather than *discourses* that govern their subjects' minds and bodies. Though my analytical approach is aligned with Sunderland's in many respects, I develop her approach by placing more emphasis on the discursive nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity; by focusing more intensely on the ways in which particular linguistic items can be said to constitute forms of knowledge and position subjects, and thereby inscribe power relations (see sections 4.3.6 and 4.4).

2.5. Self-reflections

I am aware that the poststructuralist paradigm has far more breadth and depth than I can do justice in this limited space. A canonical review of the group of theories captured by the term 'poststructuralism' would probably include, for example, the work of Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan, Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida, who have received only passing mention in this chapter. This chapter does not purport, however, to offer such a review: it does not aim to situate this study within a broad poststructuralist paradigm, but rather, within a more specific feminist poststructuralist framework. It therefore focuses in very quickly on Foucauldian theory, leading in to a discussion of feminist poststructuralist theory and other discourse analytical perspectives that draw primarily on Foucauldian poststructuralist theory, such as critical discourse analysis. This focus may in some ways be limiting, but on the other hand, it serves to very clearly contextualise and outline the specific foundations for this study.

The development of a theoretical framework for this thesis, particularly my allegiance to feminist poststructuralism, has undoubtedly been influenced by my scholarly connections and particular academic context. Both poststructuralism, and more generally, postmodernism, were introduced to me through my review of recent gender and language research (see section 3.2). My understanding of the developments and recent trends in this field significantly influenced my theoretical outlook, leading me to engage with a great deal of work in the poststructuralist paradigm that is outlined in this chapter. I engaged with the work of gender and language researchers such as Baxter (2003) and

Sunderland (2000, 2004), for example, *before* retracing their steps back to key poststructuralist theorists such as Foucault. The particular influence of Judith Baxter, who supervised this thesis, cannot be denied. Though she did not explicitly restrict or prescribe my focus, she directed me to certain key work and authors, most notably Foucault (especially (1972, 1978), Bakhtin (1981) and Butler (1999), whose work I touch on in section 3.2.2. My respect for her as a scholar, and her outlook, has undoubtedly influenced my perspective, the focus of my reading and the literature I have chosen to explore in detail.

2.6. Summary and conclusion

In this chapter, I have situated this thesis very firmly within a poststructuralist, and more specifically, a *feminist* poststructuralist framework. I have outlined the key poststructuralist principles that underpin the development of this study, namely, that discourses work to fix meaning, to constitute knowledge, power and subjectivity, and that they operate through language. I emphasise the poststructuralist principle that, through language practices, discourses can both restrict what it is possible to know and who it is possible to be, but can also enable individuals to construct and transform the social world around them. Thus, language operates as a vehicle through which individuals can position themselves in relation to discourses, approve and uphold forms of knowledge that have acquired 'commonsense legitimacy', or envisage new possibilities.

The *feminist* poststructuralist stance taken in this thesis supports rich, in-depth qualitative analyses of constructions of motherhood in a local context that are attentive to wider social forces. It drives my quest to identify and analyse the ways of being that are available to Mumsnet users, and to consider whether transformative, alternative or subversive ways of being are opened up by users of this site. At the heart of this quest is a central concern with the interrelation of knowledge, power and subjectivity: a consideration of the ways in which individuals are positioned, and whether they are relatively powerful or powerless in relation to particular forms of knowledge surrounding parenting and motherhood. My application of feminist poststructuralist principles to the analysis of Mumsnet Talk interactions takes particular influence from the work of Baxter (2002, 2003) and Sunderland (2000, 2004), who both analyse text and talk from a feminist and poststructuralist perspective, although their approaches differ in significant ways. However, this study is not driven by a commitment to any particular methodology, but by a commitment to the spirit of questioning and inquiry, and more specifically, to my aims and preliminary research questions, which interrogate the taken-for-granted category 'mother' and demand close investigation of the interplay between discourses, power and subjectivity.

The methodological development of this study from the central aims detailed in chapter 1, the theoretical framework examined here and data collected from Mumsnet Talk itself will be outlined in detail in chapter 4. First, I focus on the contextualisation of this study in an academic tradition, in chapter 3. This chapter offers a more detailed exploration of this thesis' situation in relation to research within and beyond the sociolinguistic discipline, with a particular focus on the field of gender and language.

Chapter 3. Literature Review

3.1. Introduction

The aims of this review are twofold. First, I aim to situate this thesis within an academic tradition, showing how it draws on and is situated in relation to existing knowledge. To this end, I will show that this study has an interdisciplinary focus, but is positioned primarily within the discipline of Sociolinguistics, and more specifically, the sub-disciplinary field of gender and language (see section 3.2). I also situate this study in relation to the sociolinguistic field of language and digital communication (section 3.4) and the fields of motherhood studies (section 3.3) and parenthood and the internet (section 3.4), which are usually positioned within the discipline of Sociology, but can also include research that relates to the disciplines of Psychology and the Health Sciences, for example. The second, related aim of this review is to justify the relevance and originality of this thesis. In order to achieve this aim, I point to some of the limitations of comparable research that intersects two or more of the fields named above and/or adopts a similar theoretical framework (see sections 3.3 and 3.4.2). By doing so, I show where this study can make a particular contribution to knowledge in the areas of language, discourse studies, gender, parenthood and digital communication by addressing those limitations, and what this study offers that is different and original.

The development of this literature review has been iterative, in keeping with my qualitative, emergent approach to research design, and revealing the influence of grounded theory in particular (see section 4.2). One often quoted prerequisite for grounded theory studies, as originally conceived by Glaser and Strauss (1967), is that research should begin with no *a priori* assumptions at all. This approach has now been widely challenged, not least because it is almost impossible to begin a study with no awareness of the relevant context and literature that surrounds it in the current UK academic climate. It was a requirement of my first year qualifying report, for example, that I present my research questions and a literature review. A number of scholars have consequently negotiated just what is feasible in a grounded theory project. Hutchison, Johnston and Breckon (2010: 288), for example, suggest that many grounded theorists support 'the use of general discipline based knowledge', but maintain that conducting 'an exhaustive literature review' very early in the development of a study is not in keeping with the grounded theory tradition (see section 4.3.5).

The literature that I reviewed when I first began my PhD studies, in keeping with Hutchison et al's (2010) recommendations, constitutes the general 'discipline based knowledge' that is the foundation of this thesis. I engaged with this literature over a period of approximately six months,

before collecting or analysing any data. This core reading includes most of the gender and language literature reviewed in sections 3.2.1 to 3.2.3. I also reviewed a great deal of literature in the field of motherhood studies and language and digital communication, as well as other relevant internet studies, at this early stage. A second set of reading, conducted over a longer period of time, constitutes the more 'exhaustive' review that more fully contextualises this study. This is a set of literature with which I engaged for the first time (and sometimes revisited for the second or third time) in *response* to my emerging analysis of Mumsnet Talk threads. My review of sociological literature around the concept of class, for example, developed from a growing realisation that, both within Mumsnet itself and beyond, in terms of public and academic perceptions of the site, class was a recurring theme (see section 3.2.5). Further, my focus on studies that deal with play and experimentation in digital contexts (see section 3.4.2) emerged in response to my engagement with one particular thread from Mumsnet Talk, 'Can we have a child exchange?' (see chapter 6)*. I do not claim, of course, that this review is, or ever could be, 'exhaustive'. Rather, moving between my data, analysis and relevant literature, I came to a point of 'saturation' (see section 4.3), where further reading and analysis no longer yielded significant new insights. Section 3.5 explores some of the personal, academic and practical factors that have influenced my selection of literature for this review.

3.2. Gender and language

This thesis is situated most firmly within the field of gender and language. I therefore devote substantial space to the exploration of this field and my situation within it, starting with a brief overview of the development of gender and language research over the past four decades.

Broad trends in gender and language research have been framed in line with the model of three feminist 'waves' (Mills and Mullany, 2011). The 'first wave' of feminism, associated with the suffragette movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, pre-dates the development of gender and language as a distinct field of study. Linguistic research that took account of gender as a linguistic variable began to gather momentum in the early 1970s, and has come to be known as 'second wave' gender and language research because it coincided with the height of second wave feminism (Mills and Mullany, 2011). This second wave of feminism is associated with modernist perspectives, and indeed has also been labelled 'modernist feminism' (Baxter, 2003) (see section 2.2 for a brief outline of modernist principles). The 'third wave' of gender and language research is aligned with third wave feminism, also labelled 'poststructuralist feminism' (Baxter, 2003), again for its theoretical allegiances (see sections 2.2 and 2.3). It is important to note, however, that the two 'waves' of gender and language research outlined here do not necessarily operate as distinct and

separate models. Baxter (2003: 5), for example, has conceptualised these waves as 'competing theoretical *strands*' (her emphasis), whilst Mills (2008: 22) suggests that 'Third Wave feminism is best seen as a development from Second Wave feminism which nevertheless depends on the basic framework of Second Wave feminism for its theoretical integrity' (see section 3.2.3). Shifts and developments within the field of gender and language, and particularly tensions between second and third wave approaches, have been charted extensively (see, for example, Freed, 2003; Lazar and Kramarae, 2011; Mills and Mullany, 2011; Talbot, 2010). In this section, I outline the development of the field of gender and language with a focus on key approaches and studies that are particularly relevant for this thesis.

3.2.1. 'Second wave' gender and language research: Dominance, deficit and difference

'Second wave' gender and language research often sought to identify and explain perceived differences between the 'language of women' and the 'language of men' using what are now commonly called the 'deficit', 'dominance' and 'difference' models (Freed, 2003; Talbot, 2010). These models share the same opening, modernist assumption; that there *are differences* between the way 'men' and 'women' use language and, implicitly, that 'men' and 'women' can be grouped into these fixed binary categories. However, researchers working with these models offer contrasting explanations for these perceived differences. Proponents of the 'dominance' model (e.g. Fishman, 1983; Lakoff, 1975; Zimmerman and West, 1975) attribute language difference to women's subordinate position in society. Those working with the 'deficit' model usually take the same stance, but focus on the 'deficiencies' of 'women's language' when compared with 'men's language' (e.g. Lakoff, 1975). Scholars conducting 'difference' research, also known as the 'subcultural' approach (e.g. Maltz and Borker, 1982; Tannen, 1982, 1990, 1994), tend to take the position that 'men' and 'women' each have their own distinctive linguistic styles, but do not attribute these differences to power relations. These studies contrast with 'dominance' and 'deficit' research in their positive interpretation of gender differences. Coates (1988) and Jones (1980), for example, in their studies of the language of all-female groups, have worked to reclaim the language of women by drawing attention to perceived communicative strengths in their language habits, such as the cohesive function of collaborative talk.

Such 'second wave' approaches, though they flourished in the 1970s and 1980s, are not restricted to this time frame. Research focusing on differences between the 'language of women' and 'language of men' has endured, for example, in the field of language and digital communication, most notably in the work of Susan Herring and her colleagues (e.g. Herring and Paolillo, 2006; Herring, 2010; Kapidzic and Herring, 2011; Panyametheekul and Herring, 2007; Zelenkauskaite and Herring, 2008).

Panyametheekul and Herring (2007), for example, seek to discover how the participation and turn taking practices of men and women compare in a Thai chat room. Zelenkauskaite and Herring (2008) aim to compare the self-presentations of male and female writers of personal advertisements submitted to the Lithuanian program *Telejazz.* At times, Herring and her colleagues (e.g. Herring and Paolillo, 2006; Kapidzic and Herring, 2011) acknowledge and incorporate aspects of poststructuralist theory more usually associated with 'third wave' approaches (see section 3.2.2), particularly the potential for multiple and diverse, rather than fixed and dichotomous identities. However, Herring's overarching aims across a range of studies tend to include the systematic examination and comparison of 'male and female communication and self-presentation strategies' (Kapidzic and Herring, 2011: 41).

Holmes and Stubbe (2003) offer a useful summary of some key findings about the 'language of women' and the 'language of men' from several decades of mainly 'second wave' gender and language research (Table 3.1; also see Talbot, 2003, for a similar list). However, by focusing on 'masculine' and 'feminine' interactional styles and communicative functions, rather than the fixed categories that characterised earlier research, they distance themselves from modernist perspectives, moving away from an essentialist view of gender.

Table 3.1. Widely cited features of 'feminine' and 'masculine' interactional style (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003: 574)

Feminine	Masculine
indirect conciliatory facilitative collaborative minor contribution (in public) supportive feedback person/process-oriented affectively oriented	direct confrontational competitive autonomous dominates (public) talking time aggressive interruptions task/outcome-oriented referentially oriented

In table 3.2, I adapt Holmes and Stubbe's (2003) list, focusing in on the 'feminine' column and summarising some of the linguistic forms that have been associated with 'feminine' interactional styles across early gender and language research. The attribution of linguistic forms to specific functions, and even more reductively, to the 'language of women', has since been widely criticised, because it disregards the complexities of language as the situated practice of its users. As Cameron, McAlinden and O'Leary (1988: 76) point out, a recurrent form, such as the tag question, cannot be

ascribed solely to one function; rather, in real talk, 'most utterances do many things at once'. It is therefore important to note that my aim in creating this table is not to show what linguistic forms women use for particular functions, but what *claims* have been made about the linguistic forms women use for particular functions. I return to the relevance of these claims in section 3.2.4, and in my analysis of the thread 'Can we have a child exchange?' (see chapter 6).

Table 3.2. Linguistic forms associated with 'feminine' interactional styles

Indirect	Euphemisms (Lakoff, 1975) Questions/Tag questions (Lakoff, 1975) Rising inflections (Lakoff, 1975) Indirect requests (Lakoff, 1975) Epistemic modality or 'hedges' (Coates, 1988, 1996)
Conciliatory (appeasing/ peace-making)	Epistemic modality or 'hedges' (Coates, 1988; 1996) Tag questions (Coates, 1988, 1996)
Facilitative	Questions/Tag questions (Holmes, 1984; Coates, 1988, 1996; Fishman, 1983) Topic initiation (Fishman, 1983) Hedges (Coates, 1996)
Collaborative	Tag questions (Holmes, 1984) Minimal responses (Coates, 1988; 1996) Simultaneous or overlapping speech (Coates, 1988; 1996) Jointly constructed utterances (Coates, 1996) Repetition (between speakers: Coates, 1996)
Supportive feedback	Minimal responses (Coates, 1988, 1996; Fishman, 1983)
Person/ process-oriented	Tag questions (Holmes, 1984)
Affectively oriented (relating to moods, feelings, attitudes)	Intensifiers (Lakoff, 1975) Repetition (for emphasis: Coates, 1996) 'Empty'/'intensive' adjectives (Lakoff, 1975)

One aspect of communication and interaction that is not specifically addressed by tables 3.1 and 3.2 is humour. Crawford (1995: 2) points out that 'folklore' studies (such as Lakoff's (1975) 'Language and Woman's Place') often perpetuate the stereotype that 'women lack a sense of humor'. Empirical studies have not tended to support this stereotype, though some offer instances where styles of humour do fall in line with the stereotypically gendered styles outlined above. Coates (1996), for example, suggests that co-operation and collaboration are key to women's humour. The claim that women's humour is more co-operative in style is further emphasised by Holmes (2006: 110; see also

Holmes and Stubbe, 2003), who maintains that 'a co-operative style of humour is widely perceived as more feminine, while contestive and competitive humour is regarded as more masculine in style'. This is a point to which I will return in my analysis of 'Can we have a child exchange?' (see section 6.2.1).

3.2.2. 'Third wave' gender and language research: Diversity

Much second wave gender and language research has been criticised for its simplistic and generalised polarisation of 'men' and 'women' as opposites, with predictable, fixed linguistic habits (Cameron and Coates, 1989; Cameron, 1996; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992). The 'dominance', 'deficit' and 'difference' models associated with this wave of research were increasingly rejected in the 1980s and 1990s as more and more gender and language scholars posited that the social phenomenon of 'gender' had been under-theorised in early work; that gender was not merely an explanation for linguistic phenomena, but a complex, multiple and changeable construct in itself (Cameron, 1996). Furthermore, modernist perspectives were increasingly seen to reinforce essentialist assumptions about gender (Bing and Bergvall, 1996), legitimising discourses of gender differentiation and thus potentially further limiting the subject positions available to individuals in society.

In response, what can be broadly (if a little reductively; see sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.3) categorised as 'third wave' gender and language study has tended to draw influence from branches of postmodernism such as social constructionism and poststructuralism. A 'third wave' approach therefore moves away from gender polarisation and a view of gender as 'essential' or 'natural', towards an emphasis on gender as a social construction, which is diverse, plural and fluid (Bing and Bergvall, 1996; Cameron, 1996). The work of Butler (1999) has been particularly influential in the development and direction of third wave gender and language study. Butler (1999: 45) proposes that gender, rather than being an internal, essential, fixed concept, is a *performance:* 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame'. Over time, Butler (1999: 45) suggests, the persistent repetition of such acts comes to 'produce' gender, to give gender an 'appearance of substance', when in fact gender does not exist outside of these socially constructed performances. This is in line with the conceptualisation of gender not as a *noun:* an essential 'fact', but as a *verb:* an ongoing process tied to action and enactment (Cameron, 1996; Crawford, 1995). A poststructuralist framework underpins much notable third wave gender and language research that has significantly influenced the theoretical and methodological development of this thesis (for example Baxter, 2003, 2014; Sunderland, 2000, 2004; see sections 2.3 and 2.4.3).

The movement of the field of gender and language towards postmodernist perspectives has also precipitated significant methodological shifts, with the field now tending to be dominated by qualitative, often ethnographic studies (see, for example, Baxter, 2003; Holmes, 2006; L. Jones, 2012). This 'local focus' (Baxter, 2006; Cameron, 2006b; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; Mills and Mullany, 2011) goes hand-in-hand with the recognition that it is no longer appropriate to make 'sweeping generalisations about the way that all women speak' (Baxter, 2006: xvi); small-scale and ethnographic approaches are able to support the exploration of diverse and multiple gendered identities. Further, the field has broadened its focus, increasingly taking in the themes of language, gender *and sexuality* (see Ehrlich, Meyerhoff, and Holmes, 2014).

3.2.3. Tensions in the field: Local vs. global, feminist vs. relativist

The concept of 'waves' is undoubtedly useful for distinguishing two broad trends in the field of gender and language research, and for positioning new research in relation to these trends. However, this dichotomy can also be problematic (Baxter, 2003; Mills, 2008). It implies that studies within each wave are relatively unified in approach and aims, which is not always the case. In this section, I explore some of the tensions *within* what has been described as third wave gender and language research.

One significant source of tension within third wave gender and language research has been the perceived incongruity between feminist goals and what Gill (1995) describes as the 'relativism' associated with postmodern standpoints (see section 2.3). Feminist aims have increasingly been foregrounded in gender and language research, with many scholars such as Holoshitz and Cameron (2014), Holmes (2006) and Mullany (2007) seeking to produce feminist research of practical relevance. The numerous explicitly feminist methods developed and/or adopted by gender and language researchers is also a testament to the relevance of feminism in the field. For example, Baxter's (2003) feminist poststructuralist discourse analysis (see section 2.4.3), Lazar's (2005) feminist critical discourse analysis and Kitzinger's (2000) feminist conversation analysis have all been employed by gender and language scholars. However, Gill (1995: 167) suggests that feminist research can be paralysed by the avoidance of dichotomies and generalisations that has tended to epitomise third wave gender and language research because, as she puts it, 'the notion that subject positions are multiple and fragmented can lead to the denial of any identity around which we can collectively mobilize'.

Many gender and language scholars have recognised the tensions between 'feminism' and 'relativism', and in response, have advocated an approach that combines explorations of the complex, fluid and multiple relationships between gender and language in 'local' contexts with

'global' thinking about the way gendered structures operate in a wider social context (Baxter, 2006; Cameron, 2006a, 2006b). Such an approach may rely on some generalisations, or at least recognise that generalisations about gender do have an important place in everyday life, and are central to many people's sense of self (Holmes and Meyerhoff, 2003; Holmes, 2006; Mills and Mullany, 2011). This desire for a 'middle ground' has led many scholars back to second wave gender and language research, which, Mills and Mullany (2011: 53) suggest, can offer a surprisingly accurate reflection of 'societal expectations and norms of appropriate gendered behaviour'. Holmes and Stubbe (2003), Holmes (2006) and Mullany (2007), for example, have used the findings of early gender and language research as a starting point for their studies of gendered identity constructions in local (workplace) contexts, taking the list set out in table 3.1 as a starting point – as a 'guide to stereotypically gender*ed* speech styles' (Mullany, 2007: 33, her emphasis). Such an approach allows these researchers to conduct analyses that are sensitive to both local and global concerns; to interpret 'the complexities of workplace interaction' against established norms, and thus to understand the pressures and expectations women and men experience in their everyday lives (Holmes, 2006: 4).

The fruitful combination of findings from early gender and language research in studies that take a theoretical stance more allied with the poststructuralist paradigm further highlights potential problems with the notion that there are distinct 'waves' of gender and language research. This distinction may encourage scholars to discard studies of gender and language that are perceived to be outmoded when in fact, as suggested above, they may still have relevance. Intersections between 'local' and 'global' approaches, 'stereotypes' and 'diversity' are of particular interest here because, though this thesis ostensibly takes a 'diverse', 'local' approach (see section 3.2.2), I also draw at times on stereotypes about the 'language of women', in an attempt to identify and understand the common assumptions and expectations upon which Mumsnet users draw in their digital interactions (see section 6.2.1). I also attempt to move from claims about the very local, specific context of two singular threads from Mumsnet Talk to wider statements about language, gender, parenthood and digital interaction (see chapters 7 and 8). In the next section (3.2.4), I draw attention to a concept that has proved particularly relevant in many studies that adopt a dual local/global focus, and upon which I draw extensively in the analysis of chapter 6: indexicality.

3.2.4. Indexing gender

An indexical approach to the study of gender and language works from the premise that certain linguistic and visual resources are widely associated with one gender or another. It is worth briefly explaining here what is meant by an 'index'. According to Peirce (1998 [1895]: 14):

> An *index* stands for its object by virtue of a real connection with it, or because it forces the mind to attend to that object. Thus, we say a low barometer with a moist air is an *indication* of rain… The pole star is an *index,* or pointing finger, to show us which way is north… The demonstrative pronouns, "this" and "that," are indices. For they call upon the hearer to use his (*sic*) powers of observation, and so establish a real connection between his (*sic*) mind and the object.

In brief, an 'index' is a sign that comes to represent something else. Ochs' (1992) concept of indexicality relies on the notion that particular linguistic or visual signs can, and do, 'index' *gender*. She suggests that there are two types of indices. *Direct* indices, such as the personal pronoun 'he' or the category 'mother', point directly to the gender of the referent. *Indirect* indices, however, come to be associated with a particular gender through shared cultural knowledge and assumptions (also see Holmes, 2006; Mullany, 2007). For example, long hair may index femininity, pink can be seen to indicate that a baby is female and a string of polite euphemisms in anonymous digital interaction may indicate that the author is a woman. Such indirect indices, Ochs (1992) suggests, are the more common of the two types, and have become metonyms for wider gendered constructs. Indexicality, as Ochs conceptualises it, is consistent with the poststructuralist, and particularly Bakhtinian (1981), notion that words must pass through a social atmosphere before reaching their meaning; that no words are free from connotations or prior associations (see section 2.2). The array of indirectly indexical connotations and meanings that accompany every word we speak are what make language a set of complex and infinitely nuanced resources that individuals can draw on to discursively position themselves and others (see Davies and Harré, 1990; section 2.2), rather than a set of directly indexical signs and symbols.

Ochs' (1992) theory of indexicality has proved useful at the problematic intersection between second and third wave gender and language research. The linguistic resources highlighted in the work of early gender and language scholars (see table 3.2), for example, can be conceptualised as indirect indices of gender. This is because they represent cultural stereotypes: as Holmes (2006: 7) has suggested, 'this wide-ranging research has… established the broad parameters of what are widely regarded as normative, appropriate, and unmarked means of signalling gender identity'. Where Ochs' (1992) approach departs significantly from early gender and language studies, however, is in her claim that the relation between gender and index is *non-exclusive:* that is, linguistic indices are not solely associated with a particular group. It is also *constitutive*, so that an individual's position in relation to society is mediated through and by indexical language.

Two studies that draw on the concept of indexicality in relation to gender are Hall's (1995) study of telephone sex line workers and Barrett's (1998) study of African American drag queens. Both scholars suggest that their research subjects use linguistic resources that are stereotypically associated with

women, such as intensifiers, questions, supportive comments and precise lexical descriptions (Hall, 1995), 'empty' adjectives, tag questions and rising intonation in statement contexts (Barrett, 1998), to *index* femininity. The work of Lakoff (1975) is a point of reference for both Barrett (1998) and Hall (1995). Lakoff's (1975) work is now widely considered to be outdated and not empirically sound. However, both Barrett (1998) and Hall's (1995) studies show that many of the features of 'women's language' as she identifies them persist in cultural stereotypes. Their application of her findings shows that, far from being 'powerless language', 'women's language' can be drawn upon to afford individuals a degree of power; to control and manipulate their interactions and narratives. As Hall (1995: 208) explains:

> manipulating the female conversational stereotype… potentially brings [sex line workers] tens of thousands of dollars; it allows them to support themselves without having to participate in a patriarchal business structure; it lets them exercise sexual power without fear of bodily harm or judicial retribution.

Barrett (1998), similarly, suggests that the African American drag queens of his study do not position themselves as powerless when they use of indices of femininity. Rather, he suggests that they draw on these resources in order to critique 'the social inequalities associated with white society… [and] undermine audience assumptions concerning issues of social difference such as ethnicity, sexuality, class or gender'. More recently, Holmes (2006), Holmes and Stubbe (2003) and Mullany (2007) have also analysed the complex ways in which individuals draw on resources that are indexical of gender in their everyday interactions, and the wide-ranging, sometimes counter-intuitive effects of their participants' adoption of indexical resources. Holmes (2006: 3), for example, offers as an example the self-construction of a 'confident woman manager', Jill, who uses linguistic features stereotypically associated with femininity to draw on 'the well-established stereotype of feminine incompetence around technology'. Holmes (2006: 3) interprets Jill's performance of femininity as an 'ironic parody' of the feminine role, which 'implicitly 'troubles'' stereotypical assumptions about femininity. These studies show that individuals can draw on gendered indices with a range of effects, which can vary according to context, and cannot always be straightforwardly tied to particular social functions or used to position individuals in a fixed gendered subjectivity.

3.2.5. Intersectionality: Language, gender, class?

The very title 'gender and language', or even 'language, gender and sexuality', as the field is now often known (see Ehrlich and Meyerhoff, 2014), implies a restricted focus on gender (and/or sexuality) that does not take account of other social categories that may be relevant to individuals, such as age, culture, class, educational background, ethnicity, and so on. Yet intersectionality, which Levon (2015: 295) defines as 'the belief that no one category… is sufficient to account for individual

experience or behavior' is of continued importance for gender and language scholars. This theme was often made relevant in the debates around the 1990s, at a time when feminist linguists were becoming increasingly concerned that gender was being abstracted from other aspects of social identity in gender and language research (e.g. Bing and Bergvall, 1996; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992; see section 3.2.2). It has remained true, however, that intersectional analyses of gender and class, race and age, for example, are not so established within sociolinguistic research as they are in the sociological discipline, which has seen landmark intersectional studies from influential feminist scholars such as hooks (1981) and Skeggs (1997). That is not to say that intersectionality has been entirely absent from linguistic studies: many sociolinguists *have* considered the relevance of a range of intersecting socio-cultural classifications for particular groups or individuals (Levon, 2015) and intersectional research is becoming increasingly prominent in the field of gender and language. To give some recent examples, Holoshitz and Cameron (2014: 169) explore 'the intersecting influences of sexism and ethnocentrism' in their study of the linguistic representation of sexual violence in conflict settings through news media. In an analysis that cross-cuts gender, sexuality, race and place, Milani (2013: 630) claims that users of the online forum 'meetmarket' construct same-sex desire in ways that are 'racially monochromatic' and 'gender normative'. These constructions can be explained, he suggests, in relation to the regulation of gender, race and sexuality in South African politics, both past and present. Most recently, Baker and Levon (2016) have analysed racialised and classed representations of masculinity in the UK print media, emphasising the relation between these intersecting systems of classification. Yet, there are many more studies that remain exclusively focused on gender and Levon (2015) has argued that intersectional approaches need to be more fully integrated in the field as it moves forward.

This thesis explores the discursive construction of *mother*hood, a category that, in itself, is gendered. The name of my research site, 'Mumsnet', also employs this gendered category, and its users are known to be predominantly *female* parents (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013; see section 1.2). It is therefore justifiable that gender should be a particular focus for this study. Nevertheless, social categories other than gender are very likely to be relevant to Mumsnet users at the particular moments of interaction I analyse, and I am therefore alert to their potential relevance in this study. As well as gender, a second system of social categorisation that is persistently made relevant in the literature on motherhood (see section 3.3), in media descriptions of the Mumsnet site and within the Mumsnet Talk forum itself, is *class.* 'Class' as a social category has become increasingly relevant as this study has progressed (see section 3.5). I therefore devote the rest of this section to a review of the potential relevance of class in Mumsnet Talk, some key literature on the topic of social class,

and a consideration of how an intersectional analysis of gender and class may be implemented in this study.

The social construction of motherhood has long been linked to the concept of class, with scholars such as Lawler (2000), Miller (2007) and Wall (2010), following Hays (1996), suggesting that 'middle class' values are closely tied to ideals of the 'good mother' (see section 3.3). The Mumsnet site itself is also widely regarded as a classed site, both in British popular culture and academic research. Newspaper articles, particularly those that are critical of Mumsnet and its members, frequently refer to users of the site as 'middle class' (McElvoy, 2010: np), or 'upper-middle class' (Young, 2011: np). Many journalists have also alluded to stereotypes around class without categorising users explicitly, by making reference to a host of tastes, beliefs and cultural interests that are stereotypically associated with the middle classes. For example, Sibary (2013: np) describes Mumsnet users as 'Left-wing, feminist, North London yummy mummies', whilst Young (2011: np) suggests that the stereotypical Mumsnet user 'lives in a Victorian house in North London, spends weekends in the country, drives a Fiat Multipla, gets her weekly shop delivered by Ocado [and] has a fondness for Green and Black's chocolate'. These descriptions are likely to convey quite strikingly, to a British audience at least, the popular perception that Mumsnet is a site for middle class women. In the academic arena, Pedersen and Smithson (2010, 2013) have also claimed that Mumsnet is dominated by middle class users, and that the site as a whole promotes the association of middle class values with 'good' mothering practices. As well as drawing on both their own and other site users' assumptions about what marks out an individual as middle class and what middle class values *are,* Pedersen and Smithson (2010, 2013) also point to the demographic data they collected for their study, together with the 2009 Mumsnet census (Pedersen and Smithson, 2013). These data suggest that Mumsnet users are predominantly working mothers, that most have a household income above the national average and that a large number have university degrees (see section 1.2). However, I have been reluctant from the start to make claims about the relevance of class in Mumsnet Talk interactions. This reluctance is mirrored in the field of gender and language as a whole, and is not surprising, considering the well-documented reluctance of gender and language researchers to make assumptions on the basis of monolithic identity categorisations (see section 3.2.2).

A brief review of key definitions and insights from sociological studies of class is useful here before I further discuss the potential relevance of class to my analysis of Mumsnet Talk. Milner (1999: 1) defines class as a hierarchical order of social groups, 'the identity and membership of which is primarily determined by 'economic' considerations such as occupation, income and wealth'. This definition relies on the foundational assumption in much sociological research that class can be

determined by key socio-economic factors. Through various phases of development in the sociological study of class, the assumption that there are certain indicators of class, such as wealth, occupation, education and income, has tended to prevail (with the exception of scholars who have questioned the usefulness of 'class' as an analytical concept at all, such as Lyotard, 1984 and Pakulski and Waters, 1996). These indicators span a broad spectrum of social life, including personal, subjective matters such as tastes and beliefs.

Class groups are usually conceptualised, in British academic literature and in popular culture, in terms of three categories: 'upper', 'middle' and 'working' class (Abercrombie and Warde, 2003). These categories emerged during the period of the industrial revolution (Williams, 1983) and have endured to this day, despite numerous attempts by academics to develop and expand them (Goldthorpe, 1980; Savage, Cunningham, Devine, Friedman, Laurison, McKenzie, Miles, Snee and Wakeling, 2015). The comprehensive, landmark studies of both G. Marshall, Rose, Newby and Vogler (1988), and more recently, Savage et al. (2015), both capture Britons' interest in class, and their inclination towards placing themselves in classed categories. For example, over 90% of G. Marshall et al's (1988: 143) sample were able to categorise themselves as either 'working class' or 'middle class', whilst 73% felt class was 'an inevitable feature of modern society'. Though Savage et al's (2015) respondents were not asked to place themselves in class categories, the British Broadcasting Corporation, who were collaborators in the study, did create an online, interactive questionnaire dubbed the 'class calculator' in response to Savage et al's (2015) new model of class. The fact that, in just one week, seven million people used this class calculator to identify their 'new' class group, Savage and his colleagues suggest, testifies to Britons' continuing fascination with class and classed categories.

The class indices at the centre of Savage et al's (2015) recent study of class in twenty-first century Britain, which includes a questionnaire completed by 325,000 Britons and extensive follow-up interviews, reflect several decades of scholarly research. For example, their questionnaire (Savage and Devine, 2015) invites participants to choose from a selection the image that looks most like their neighbourhood, thus drawing on the notion that it is not just ownership of property, but where you live, that may be an indicator of class (also see Abercrombie and Warde, 2003). Savage et al's (2015) interest in their participants' tastes and interests, including questions about their participation in leisure activities such as watching TV, reading magazines and going to the opera, their interests in music, food and holiday preferences, reflects a long-standing correlation between class and cultural behaviour, linked to Weber's notion of 'style of life' (Giddens, 1981; Milner, 1999). The relationship between class and culture is a focal point for Bourdieu (1984), who labels particular pastimes such as

visiting art galleries or playing a musical instrument as 'highbrow' activities associated with middle and/or upper classes. Savage et al's (2015) interest in their participants' social networks draws on a long-held assumption that members of the 'upper' class, in particular, maintain their social position across generations because they have strong networks, including 'marriage or kinship relations, friendship or the 'old boy network'' (Abercrombie and Warde, 2003: 187). Finally, and predictably, Savage et al's (2015) respondents are asked to provide information about their occupation, income and education, following a long tradition of research that places these correlates at the forefront of class divisions (see, for example, Goldthorpe, 1980; Parkin, 1972).

In table 3.3, I draw together some of the research cited above in a compact list of indices that have been associated with class. It is useful here because it summarises some enduring findings and assumptions about class, and what constitutes membership of a particular class, just as the list of features of 'feminine' and 'masculine' interactional styles in tables 3.1 and 3.2 summarises some key findings from early gender and language research. It presents class distinctions on a sliding scale, from what have been called the 'lower' or 'working' class, which Savage et al. (2015) call the 'precariat', to the 'middle classes', which Savage et al. (2015) divide into several categories, including 'technical' and 'established' middle class, and the 'upper' class, which Savage et al. (2015) call the 'wealth elite'.

Table 3.3. Indices of class, based on sociological research*

	Lower/working class	Middle classes	Upper class
	⟶		
Occupation	Waged, unskilled, manual	Salaried, professional and management; self-employed/small business ownership; occupation more significant than wealth	Salaried, professional and management; self-employed/large business ownership
Property	Rental in homes with low value, neighbourhoods with low 'market attractiveness' (Savage et al., 2015)	Likely ownership of homes with mid to high value, in neighbourhoods with mid to high 'market attractiveness' (Savage et al., 2015)	Ownership of (multiple) homes with very high value, in neighbourhoods with very high 'market attractiveness' (Savage et al., 2015)
Wealth	Very low income, little or no accumulated	Mid to high income, some accumulated	Very high income, and/or significant inherited/

	wealth	wealth	accumulated wealth; wealth more significant than occupation
Education	Compulsory, state education only, few qualifications	University and possibly private school education, numerous qualifications	Likely educated at prestigious and/or private institutions such as Eton, Cambridge (Abercrombie and Warde, 2003), numerous qualifications
Cultural interests	Restricted engagement with leisure and cultural activities.	Engagement with a wide range of leisure and cultural activities, sometimes 'highbrow' (Bourdieu, 1984; Savage et al., 2015)	Engagement with a wide range of leisure and cultural activities, often 'highbrow' (Bourdieu, 1984; Savage et al., 2015)
Social Networks	Restricted social networks; mainly familial ties	More diverse social networks; friendship, business and educational ties	Strong, mutually beneficial networks, based on familial, business, friendship and acquaintance ties: often called the 'old boy network' (Abercrombie and Warde, 2003)

*Collated from Goldthorpe (1980), Parkin (1982), Abercrombie and Warde (2003), Savage et al. (2015), Giddens (1981), Bourdieu (1984).

These indices are likely to be salient in terms of everyday assumptions and stereotypes about what it means to belong to a particular classed category. However, it remains problematic, especially within the poststructuralist paradigm of this thesis, to draw conclusions about individuals' classed identities on the basis of such variables. I believe it would be simplistic and presumptuous to say, for example, that because a person regularly visits the theatre, holds a university degree and has a higher than average income, they can be easily categorised as 'middle class', in the same way that it would be problematic to say that because a person has long hair, wears pink and uses facilitative linguistic resources in their interactions with others, they must be a 'woman'. As I have shown in section 3.2.4, however, indexical language does not necessarily point directly to the nature of the object it describes. Rather, it can be conceptualised as a set of *resources* that are available to individuals and groups in order to discursively position themselves and others (Davies and Harré, 1990). Thus, individuals may adopt particular indices of femininity, and in doing so position themselves as 'feminine' at a particular moment, or even, as the work of Hall (1995), Barrett (1998) and Holmes (2003) has shown, to adopt a more complex stance. Extending this line of argument to the concept

of class, I suggest here that individuals may position themselves as middle or upper class, for example, by living in a large, well-maintained house in a prestigious neighbourhood, or by wearing expensive, designer clothes. Individuals may also, and importantly for this study of digital interaction, draw on such resources in their interactions with others. For example, they may mention their leisure interests, such as playing bingo or going to the opera. They may speak in a way that displays their communicative competence in relation to educational and professional spheres, by using formal, sophisticated vocabulary that would be highly valued in those arenas. The notion that individuals may draw upon resources that are indexical of class as well as gender in their interactions, and that in doing so they may position themselves as 'middle class' or 'female' at a particular moment, will be important for my analysis of Mumsnet Talk, particularly the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread (chapter 6).

3.3. Motherhood: Norms, ideals and expectations

There is limited research in the field of gender and language that explicitly focuses on motherhood, or even parenthood more generally. There is, however, a large body of work in the discipline of Sociology that explores cultural norms and assumptions relating to gender and parenthood, particularly *motherhood*. I therefore turn at this point to a brief exploration of this literature, emphasising research that takes a *discursive,* and sometimes also a *linguistic* perspective. I consider what such research has revealed about the ways in which such norms are taken up, negotiated and challenged in people's everyday lives.

The 'intensive mothering' model (Hays, 1996) is a cornerstone of the extensive body of motherhood literature in the western sociological context. This model positions the mother as the primary carer for her children, and is explicitly child-centred, with the mother's behaviour being determined by the child's needs, and her own needs being placed firmly below, or in opposition to, the child's. Scholars have continued to explore gendered expectations of parents, and parents' negotiation of these expectations, in the light of Hays' (1996) intensive mothering model, with many suggesting that not only do narrow, idealist and essentialist expectations persist, but they continue to intensify (Johnston and Swanson, 2006, 2007; Wall, 2010, 2013), functioning for many mothers as standards by which they are judged. Three of Hays' (1996) key themes have remained central to sociological explorations of motherhood. I categorise these themes as 'mother as main parent', 'child-centred motherhood' and 'middle class motherhood', and briefly explore each in turn below.

The essentialist assumption that women are 'naturally' predisposed to the role of primary caregiver has long been a theme of feminist scholarly work. Rich (1986: 97), for example, has argued that the role of 'caregiver' has become an 'ethical imperative', not just for mothers, but for *all* women, as

characteristics stereotypically associated with 'natural' femininity are conflated with characteristics thought to be 'maternal' such as being nurturing, sensitive, patient, warm, self-sacrificing and pacific (see also Bem, 1993; Gillies, 2007; Lawler, 2000; Maher and Saugeres, 2007). The persistence of mother-exclusive parenting ideals, Wall (2010, 2013) and Gillies (2007) argue, continues to be very powerful in western society, where dominant discourses position women as 'natural' carers, and therefore the parent most needed by their children. Such assumptions, according to Bem (1993), have grown out of fundamental biological differences between men and women, into complex social constructions of motherhood that are intimately bound with notions of 'nature' and 'responsibility'.

Mother-exclusive parenting ideals are closely linked with the imperative for mothers to be child-centred in many sociological studies of motherhood. Both themes are bound up with entrenched notions of women's 'natural' responsibility for and inclination towards caring for children. Consequently, many motherhood scholars have shown that the only desire many women feel they can legitimately claim within discourses of children's needs is 'the desire to be the good mother' (Lawler, 2000: 153), whilst men are rarely subject to the same pressures (Miller, 2011; Wall, 2010). Wall (2010, 2013) has suggested that the demands placed upon mothers to be child-centred have intensified in recent years; that mothers are now expected to be both expert in, and entirely responsible for, the early development and future success of their children. Her study of twenty-first century articles from a Canadian parenting magazine (Wall, 2013) shows how discourses of intensive child-centred mothering, neoliberal self-responsibility and risk converge in a way that makes it difficult for women to legitimise their other needs, whilst also positioning themselves as 'good mothers'. She suggests that the convergence of these discourses has a powerful effect, working to 'open up less rather than more space for women's equality in the workplace and family' (Wall, 2013: 170).

There has been particular emphasis across a range of sociological literature on the link between 'intensive mothering' expectations, which are associated with 'normal' and 'good' mothering practices, and 'middle class' values (e.g. Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Gillies, 2007; Lawler, 2000; see section 3.2.5). Many scholars of motherhood studies have argued that it is mainly middle class mothers who are socially judged by standards of 'intensive mothering', and thus are most affected by these expectations (e.g. Johnston and Swanson, 2006, 2007; Miller, 2007; Wall, 2010). Both Lawler (2000) and Gillies (2007), however, suggest that this is not the case, and that criticisms, targeted support and advice are actually directed time and again towards 'working class' mothers. Gillies (2007: 8), for example, points to initiatives such as the 'Sure Start' programme, which targets 'poor and disadvantaged mothers', framing them as a group who need to be taught good parenting

practices. Lawler (2000) suggests that the image of the 'good mother' has been created at the expense of such groups, including single and working-class mothers, who are seen to be outside the normative and morally 'right' criteria for 'good' mothering. The very concept of class, and particularly the labelling of individuals in terms of classed categorisations, is questioned in this thesis (see sections 3.2.5 and 3.5). However, the fact that so many scholars have pointed to persistent cultural ties between 'good' mothering and middle class values cannot be ignored. The concept of class is also particularly relevant in relation to my research site, Mumsnet, which I note in section 3.2.5 has often been conceptualised as a 'middle class' space. Indeed, the intersection of class and gender in Mumsnet Talk interactions will prove to be an important theme in my analysis of the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread (see chapter 6).

The notion that there is an inescapable 'ethical imperative' for women to be caring, child-centred mothers who uphold middle class values is pervasive in the literature reviewed so far. Many of these studies suggest that the essentialist and restrictive foundations of dominant discourses of mothering make it difficult for women to reconcile the all-consuming demands of being a 'good mother' with the demands of other aspects of their lives, such as employed work, ambitions, or simply 'personal time' (Bobel, 2004; Hays, 1996; Johnston and Swanson, 2007; J. Marshall, Godfrey and Renfrew, 2007; Wall, 2010). Many sociological studies of motherhood that take a poststructuralist stance, however, acknowledge that women are not powerless to be subject positioned as carers and nurturers, but can negotiate or take up alternative subject positions (Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Maher and Saugeres, 2007; Miller, 2007). Such studies show that constructions of motherhood, and particularly the 'good mother', are dynamic, complex, and vary from one individual, situation, or context to another. For example, some authors have emphasised the restrictions dominant discourses continue to place on the lives of both male and female parents, but also show that mothers (and fathers – see Miller, 2011) can negotiate, challenge and subvert these discourses (e.g. Duncan and Edwards, 1999; Gillies, 2007; Lawler, 2000; Miller, 2007, 2011), even if they have to do so in 'creative and subversive ways' (Lawler, 2000: 167). Lawler (2000: 163), for example, shows how one of her participants, 'Anna', reinforces the notion that 'maternal wants should be subordinated to childhood needs, and that to do so is the mark of a 'good mother'', yet also attempts to assert a sense of 'self' that escapes the subject position 'mother', at times straightforwardly dissociating herself from this category. In this way, Lawler suggests, Anna redefines motherhood for her own purposes without directly disavowing dominant ideals.

This thesis is aligned with much of the literature reviewed in this section in many respects. For example, like Gillies (2007), Lawler (2000), Miller (2007, 2011) and Wall (2013), my feminist

poststructuralist outlook (see section 2.3) leads me to focus on the powerful discursive forces that may work to fix parents in gendered subject positions, whilst also paying attention to the diverse voices of parents themselves; in particular, the ways in which they position themselves in relation to these discourses. Like Gillies (2007), Lawler (2000), Miller (2007) and Duncan and Edwards (1999), I conduct qualitative analyses in a 'local' context, with the intention of capturing rich, in-depth analytical insights into the way a relatively small group of women negotiate a range of discourses in their everyday interactions. However, my study breaks away from the literature reviewed so far in two important respects. First, this thesis is situated within the discipline of Sociolinguistics, and more specifically, the field of gender and language. I therefore pay close attention to the role *language* plays in discursive struggles around constructions of motherhood in a way that these scholars do not. Because I take the view that the social world is constructed through language (see section 2.2), I suggest that inattention to language is a significant limitation of this literature. Additionally, the discursive studies of motherhood (and sometimes fatherhood) that are reviewed here have tended to avoid any clear explication of the means by which they identify discourses. For example, in the work of scholars such as Wall (2013) and Miller (2007, 2011), discourses are introduced at the outset, as a 'given', rather than as a result of detailed analysis. Miller (2011: 1102), for example, suggests that her participants 'invoke strands of a discourse of involved fatherhood' but never explains how she identifies these strands. Such vague claims contribute to a widespread lack of clarity as to what makes discourses distinctive, how discourses operate in everyday practice and how discursive analysis can enhance research in the social sciences generally, and studies concerned with issues of gender and parenthood more specifically.

There is, however, a much smaller collection of research, positioned within the field of gender and language, that explores constructions of both motherhood and fatherhood from a discursive-linguistic perspective (e.g. Alexander and McMullen, 2014; Ellece, 2012; Sunderland, 2000). The work of Sunderland (2000) and Ellece (2012) is of particular interest here because they also address the second limitation of many sociological motherhood studies identified above, by setting out the identification of discourses as one of their aims, rather than assuming the presence of discourses from the outset. Both of these scholars point to specific linguistic patterns, particularly lexical items, in their identification of discourses. For example, Sunderland (2000: 249) examines the terms 'mother/father/wife/husband/partner; play/fun/help and share' in parentcraft texts, whilst Ellece (2012: 99) explores the predominance of lexical items relating to childcare, such as *thari* (baby carrier/ placenta), *lehuto* (knot for tying umbilical cord before cutting it) and *batsetsi* (new mothers) in the 'Rutu' – a celebratory chant performed at Botswanan marriage ceremonies. By showing *how* dominant discourses such as 'Part-time father/Mother as main parent' (Sunderland, 2000) and

'compulsory motherhood' (Ellece, 2012) are taken up through specific linguistic presences or absences, these authors begin to deconstruct the mechanisms by which discourses operate in a way that most of the sociological literature outlined above does not (see section 2.4.3 for further discussion of Sunderland's methods). Such a linguistic focus offers more specific means by which the discursive struggles surrounding constructions of motherhood can be identified and analysed.

3.4. Language, the internet and digital communication

The particular characteristics of my research site are not merely incidental to this study. The fact that the interactions of Mumsnet Talk are digitally mediated may well affect the nature of these interactions and the way they are analysed. It is therefore important to situate this thesis within a tradition of internet research, and particularly research that focuses on language and communication in digital contexts: a field that currently tends to be known as 'language and digital communication' (Georgakopoulou and Spilioti, 2015). This section attempts to do just that, highlighting some themes of internet research, especially within the field of language and digital communication, that are particularly relevant for this thesis, and drawing together the themes of language, gender and parenthood in the context of digital interaction.

3.4.1. What is 'the internet'?

In simple terms, the internet is a medium through which digital communication can take place: 'a way of transmitting bits of information from one computer to another' (Hine, 2000: 2). It is this simple but revolutionary function that provides opportunities for digital communication between individuals who are distant in time and/or space. In much literature from the social sciences, however, the internet is conceptualised as far more than a medium through which information is transmitted and shared: it is a 'place' in which culture (or subcultures) can be developed and nurtured (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Hine, 2000); a 'performative space' in which users are often hyper-sensitive to the way their behaviour is interpreted by others (Hine, 2000; see also Herring, 2004); a 'cyberspace' that is at once 'communal and social… informative and educative… unstable, ephemeral… radical and capable of facilitating innovation' (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006: 246). These scholars, rather than answering the question 'what is the internet?' actually address a rather more complex and interesting question that pervades studies of identities, communities and interactions online: 'what social and communicative possibilities does the internet enable or constrain?' Thus, they are interested not so much in the defining features of the technology itself, but in what users *do* with that technology, and how technology has been utilised and shaped to serve a range of social and cultural purposes. This thesis takes a similar perspective, conceptualising the relevance of the digital nature of Mumsnet users' interactions in terms of the resources and possibilities that are

available to them. Just as language offers a set of resources by which its users can position themselves in the world, the internet, and more broadly, digital technologies, also offer a range of possibilities – or *affordances* (Gibson, 1979) – to its users, and individuals may exploit these possibilities in their interactions with others. Some of the ways in which individuals can draw on digital affordances in their interactions are explored in the sections that follow.

3.4.2. Using digital resources for play and experimentation

In this section, I focus on what is made possible by play in digital contexts. I define 'play' here as a form of interaction that is imitative, and/or involves experimentation with multiple possibilities (Danet et al., 1997); an exploration of 'what can be', rather than 'what is' or 'what should be' (Handelman, 1977: 186). Play is often associated with 'make-believe' (Goffman, 1974; Handelman, 1977) and with concepts of falseness: as Bateson (1972: 188-189) observes, 'the messages or signals exchanged in play are in a certain sense untrue or not meant'. Play is therefore an important concept within the postmodern movement, which embraces multiple possibilities: the sense that 'things could always be otherwise' (Clarke, 2003: 560; see section 2.2). Many internet researchers have suggested that play is pervasive in online environments (Danet, Ruedenberg-Wright, and Rosenbaum-Tamari, 1997; Danet, 2001; Deumert, 2014; Nishimura, 2015). As Cook (2006: 40) suggests, 'the so-called 'information revolution' of the internet is in fact largely used for games, chat rooms and fantasies'. Danet et al. (1997: np) identify three forms of online play in their study of internet relay chat (IRC): 'play with frames of interaction', 'play with identity' and 'play with typographic symbols'. These forms of play are often interrelated, as where play with typography, image, or frames of interaction leads to, or is part of, play with identity. In the paragraphs that follow, I briefly explore some examples of each form of 'play' in a range of digital contexts.

The notion of playing with 'frames of interaction' is particularly relevant for my analysis of the Mumsnet Talk thread 'Can we have a child exchange?' (chapter 6), and will be explored further with particular reference to the work of Goffman (1974) in sections 4.4.1, 6.2.1 and 6.3. Danet et al. (1997) suggest that, whilst interacting online, individuals can occupy two (or more) frames simultaneously, as where they physically occupy a 'real life' frame, for example at their desk in a workspace, but also interact within an 'IRC Game' frame through the medium of the internet. Further, they suggest that the digital context allows IRC participants to move within *five* 'nested' frames (see figure 3.1), and that the further they move into these frames, the deeper they become engrossed in 'make-believe'. Within these play frames, Danet et al. (1997) suggest, IRC users' communicative possibilities are expanded; they 'enjoy reduced accountability' and 'anything may be communicated' (Danet et al., 1997: np).

Figure 3.1. Five nested frames at a virtual party on IRC (From Danet et al., 1997: np)

Danet et al's (1997) analysis of IRC users' manipulation of keyboard functions moves in to an exploration of 'play with typographic symbols'. In this form of play, the keyboard becomes an instrument, which can produce varied and sophisticated effects. In one example from Danet et al's (1997) study (extract 3.1), two IRC users take part in an elaborate visual simulation of smoking marijuana, demonstrating the idiosyncratic, innovative and context-specific effects that can be achieved through the use of basic keyboard functions.

Extract 3.1. a sequence of IRC from Danet et al. (1997: np)

<Thunder>sssssssssssss *passes joint to kang*

…………………………………

<Kang> thanx dude *puff* *hold*

…………………………………

>:-)

…………………………………

<Thunder> kang exhale.. you will die :-)

<Kang> *exhale

Other examples of internet users' play with keyboard and other digital functions can be found in Mumsnet Talk, as the following examples show (for an extended list of some of the distinctive linguistic and digital resources found in Mumsnet Talk, see Appendix B):

- strikethrough text for 'taboo' utterances: 'little ~~cow~~ darling', 'don't fight it ~~or are you shallow~~';
- asterisks used for a range of functions, including corrections: *voice, and emphasis: 'explana*tory*',

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- a range of brackets (single or double) to represent non-verbal actions, sounds, directions or 'off-stage' announcements: <sideways look and inward tut tut>, <<shrugs>>, {preens}, (whispers), <<and we have a winner>>.
- sounds presented in written form: 'bleeugh', 'Pahaha. He sounds so funny.'
- capitals for emphasis/ volume: 'I am right, I AM!'
- smilies
- other images (e.g.   (cake),   (flowers).
- unconventional punctuation and spelling: 'these threads are…………… booooooooooooring', 'you clean your loo brush in the dishwasher?!?!?!?!?!'

Similar manipulations of typography, images, punctuation and spelling are found across a range of digital contexts (see Barton and Lee, 2013; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Crystal, 2006; Danet et al., 1997; Georgakopoulou, 2005; Herring, 1999; Zappavigna, 2012). They are also found across cultures and languages; keyboard play is by no means restricted to the western context or the English language, as the examples given so far may have implied. The diversity of meanings that can be generated with Japanese *kaomoji,* for example, have been well documented (e.g., Katsuno and Yano, 2007; Nishimura, 2007). By using the keyboard in creative ways, users can express emphasis, play with stereotypes and communicate a whole range of non-verbal nuances in a digital form, with often comic results. Nishimura (2015) suggests that it is perhaps because of the multiple possibilities for experimentation with linguistic and visual forms, as seen in examples like these, that digital contexts are so well suited to creativity and play.

It is not just the creative potential of the keyboard, but also the ready availability of a range of content types, that provides ample opportunity for humour, creativity and play in digital contexts (Androutsopoulos, 2011; Markham, 2004). Internet 'memes', described by Zappavigna (2012: 100) as units of cultural meaning that 'replicate and mutate' as they are rapidly shared across a range of online networks, are a good example of play that combines language and image. These online fads consist of image/text combinations and usually rely on some form of 'inside joke' (Zappavigna, 2012), such as the 'LOLcat' trend, defined in a Wikipedia entry (2016) as 'an image macro of one or more cats', in which 'the image's text is often idiosyncratic and grammatically incorrect' (see figure 3.2, below). What these various forms of linguistic and visual play have in common is their collaborative and social function. As Nishimura (2015) points out, creativity online is often a collective act, as where members of an online community employ distinctive linguistic forms or styles (see the above examples from Mumsnet Talk), or disparate individuals affiliate through a shared 'in-joke' (as with the example of internet memes). Such collaborative playfulness, Nishimura (2015) suggests, can build a sense of shared group identity or group affiliation in digital contexts, just as it can in a broader range of social situations (see Cook, 2006).

Figure 3.2. A 'LOLcat' meme (Wikipedia, 2016)

Many of the affordances of digital communication make online spaces particularly fruitful sites for play with self-positioning and/or identity. For example, the physical separation of interactants and subsequent potential for anonymity, as well as the opportunity to carefully manage interactions and sharing practices, can offer users significant control over the impression they give of themselves. Both anonymity and play can be said to allow individuals to move beyond socio-cultural expectations and constraints; anonymity can facilitate play, and play can offer a form of anonymity; a mask to hide behind. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many online contexts associated with play are also contexts in which users enjoy a degree of anonymity, such as online role playing games or chat rooms. The correlation between anonymity and play is not particular to the internet; one only has to consider the example of masked balls or costumed carnivals (Turner, 1986, in Danet et al., 1997). But the internet makes anonymity and play possible on a large scale, leading scholars such as Barton and Lee (2013: 68) to claim that identity online increasingly becomes a matter of 'who we want to be to others'.

Several scholars have offered examples where individuals are able to transcend gender norms; to become someone else, through play in digital contexts. In his study of Swiss internet relay chats, for example, Rellstab (2007) analyses the practice of users who temporarily 'switch' their gender presentation. Rellstab's (2007: 781) examples are brief, 'temporary transgressions', but in other contexts, such as the role-playing games studied by Cherny (1999), Turkle (1995) and Danet (2001), gender play and ambiguity can be more pervasive. Within the online role-playing game 'LambdaMOO', for example, Cherny (1999) and Turkle (1995) report that users feel able to 'become' someone else for a sustained period. As one of Turkle's (1995: 184) participants puts it,

> You can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want. You can be the opposite sex. You can be more talkative. You can be less talkative. Whatever.

Danet (2001) points out that LambdaMOO facilitates such flexible self-identifications by offering its users a huge range of genders from which to choose, each with their own set of pronouns, including 'neuter', 'either', 'plural', 'egotistical' and 'royal', amongst many others. In these contexts, play can be seen to allow individuals to move beyond gendered constraints in terms of what is considered to be 'real', 'true', 'appropriate' or 'possible'. Other sites may not offer such freedom, nevertheless there are usually some opportunities for careful identity management across most social media platforms. Facebook users, for example, do not have anonymous profiles, and their interactions on the site tend to be closely related to those conducted 'offline'. As a result, Facebook users have less options in terms of who they can 'be', yet are still able to manage the impression they give to others by selecting, for example, what they wish to post in their status, what pictures they share and who they 'befriend' (and therefore who can see their profile).

3.4.3. Negotiating norms of gender and motherhood in digital contexts

Many internet researchers (e.g. Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Danet et al., 1997; Markham, 2004; Turkle, 1995) have suggested that the affordances of digital contexts, particularly anonymity and the related opportunities for play, can, to some extent, free internet users from social norms and constraints. If this is the case, digital contexts may be particularly fruitful sites for local studies of the diverse and multiple relations between language, gender, society and the individual, as I suggest Mumsnet Talk may be (see section 1.2). However, there is currently a limited range of published research in the field of gender and language that explores these themes. Three studies of note that *do* address these themes include Gong's (2016) study of the message board of a Chinese football fan site, Milani's (2013) study of the South African online community for men seeking men, 'meetmarket', and Hall et al's (2012: 379) study of an online forum 'dedicated to the discussion of metrosexuality'. Milani's (2013) study shows how meetmarket users choose to foreground particular identities over others in this digital space, whilst Hall et al. (2012) explore the ways in which male contributors to the metrosexuality forum define, take up or reject contemporary categories such as 'metrosexual'. Gong (2016), similarly, shows that Chinese Arsenal fans are able to contest and problematise dominant discourses of Chinese masculinity in a digital space. All three scholars highlight the potential for their participants to explore multiple aspects of their identities in these digital contexts. They also find, however, that users of these sites are still constrained in terms of who it is possible to 'be'. Hall et al. (2012), for example, suggest that hegemonic masculinities 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 reproduce and conform to 'normative ideas about what defines a 'man'',

whilst Gong (2016) finds that football fans' language in a Chinese fan site is still largely dominated by sexist discourses of football and patriarchy. These examples raise the much-debated question of whether, as some have suggested (see Benwell and Stokoe, 2006; Danet et al., 1997; Markham, 2004; Turkle, 1995), there is any reason to believe that we are somehow more free from social constraints when we interact online.

Much 'parenthood and the internet' research, as named by Daneback and Plantin (2008), suggests that digital affordances *do* have the capacity to empower and liberate women from a range of backgrounds in a way that can transcend wider social constraints and facilitate innovation and transformation. Research in this field suggests, for example, that the internet can offer spaces in which women can be themselves and express their views honestly (Moravec, 2011), find solace and support in a safe environment (Brady and Guerin, 2010; Chan, 2008; Mulcahy, Parry and Glover, 2015), perform multiple identities (Lakämper, 2015; Petersen, 2015) and challenge dominant constructions and representations of femininity and motherhood (Lopez, 2009). In relation to Mumsnet Talk, Pedersen and Smithson (2013: 105) suggest that this site 'provides a forum for shifting gender norms online', showing, for example, that Mumsnet users frequently use language that has been stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as aggressive language and swearing. However, just as Hall et al. (2012) and Milani (2013) have drawn attention to the persistence of gender norms in the online forums they study, so, too, have some parenthood and the internet scholars questioned the liberating capacity of online parenting sites. Worthington (2005: 56), for example, suggests that the commercial aims of sites such as the American 'iVillage' restrict the autonomy of individual users and lead to the propagation of damaging discourses that 'support our culture's contradictory expectations of women'. Madge and O'Connor's (2006) study of the UK parenting website '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 stereotypes of mothering and gender roles' in babyworld, as evidenced, for example, in participants' persistent self-introductions as the main carer, in a two-person heterosexual relationship (Madge and O'Connor 2006: 56).

Research in other fields has tended to draw similarly contrasting conclusions. For example, Chiluwa (2012: 240) shows that online campaign groups have used discussion forums and customised websites as tools to resist and protest against oppression and abuse of power in Nigerian politics. Fozdar and Pedersen (2013), similarly, have demonstrated that contributors to an interactive blog about asylum seekers have built a counter-hegemonic discourse that works to raise consciousness of

race issues and challenge racism. Elm (2007), however, has shown that gendered stereotypes prevail for young users of the Swedish online community 'Lunarstorm', whose self-presentations, contrary to her expectations, largely adhere to stereotypical expectations of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' and reinforce heteronormative ideals. Thus, it can be concluded that in some online communities or spaces, dominant norms can be challenged, making way for diverse and transformative ways of being, but in others, dominant norms and identity stereotypes will prevail. Further, it is likely that there will be opportunity for both types of interaction within single communities; that no one site will promote entirely subversive, or exclusively normative, interactions. As noted in section 3.4.1, 'the internet' is not one static, cohesive or uniform place. Rather, it is a medium through which information can be shared and people can be connected. The type of information that is shared, how, and with whom, will vary quite dramatically from one situation to the next, just as it would in offline contexts (Elm, 2007). My study of Mumsnet Talk works from this assumption, and is therefore open to the possibility that the particular affordances and resources offered within this forum could both facilitate *and* constrain its users' opportunities to negotiate and position themselves in relation to a range of discourses.

3.5. Self-reflections

I make it clear in sections 1.1 and 3.1 that this thesis is primarily situated within the field of gender and language. It is therefore the direction of and current trends within this field that have most significantly affected my outlook, the development of this thesis and, importantly here, the depth in which I explore research in other relevant fields (for further discussion see section 2.5). For example, there is a wide range of literature on the theme of motherhood within the sociological discipline, of which this review only scratches the surface. Much of the literature I did review in this field is captured with very broad brushstrokes. For example, my conceptualisation of the cultural assumptions surrounding the construct of 'motherhood', taking Hays (1996) as a starting point, bypasses many distinct areas of interest in the field. Some themes that are *not* elucidated in this review include the construction and impact of the 'breastfeeding imperative' (e.g. J. Marshall et al., 2007; Wall, 2001), tensions between 'worker' and 'mother' identities (e.g. Johnston and Swanson, 2006, 2007; Ranson, 1999) and studies of marginalised groups of mothers (e.g. Coll, Surrey, and Weingarten, 1998). There have also been an increasing number of studies of fatherhood and fathering practices in sociological research (e.g. Fischer and Anderson, 2012; Miller, 2011; Wall and Arnold, 2007). Indeed, several studies have shown that practices and discourses surrounding motherhood and fatherhood are intertwined, and can be fruitfully considered in tandem (Miller, 2011; Sunderland, 2000). However, there is a much larger body of work that focuses exclusively on *motherhood,* and this is reflected in the literature reviewed here. I focus largely on motherhood

studies because they tend to highlight the (western) cultural assumptions and expectations surrounding *women* and parenthood in particular, and thus are especially relevant for a study of the interactions of Mumsnet users, who identify themselves predominantly as women and as mothers.

There is also much that remains unsaid in this review about the field of language and digital communication. Where I chart the development of the field of gender and language in detail, situating second wave gender and language research in relation to the more recent preference for 'diverse' and 'local' studies, I do not do the same for the emerging field of language and digital communication. I do not, for example, explore the body of research Androutsopoulos (2006: 420) categorises as the ''first wave' of linguistic CMC [computer-mediated communication] studies', which tends to focus on the 'language' of the internet as a distinct variety, variously dubbed the 'third medium' (Georgakopoulou, 2005), or 'Netspeak' (Crystal, 2006). Many authors have argued that 'first wave' studies of language and digital communication tend to perpetuate homogenised, simplified and stereotypical views about the internet and the way people use it (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2006, 2008, 2011; Barton and Lee, 2013; Thurlow and Mroczek, 2011), creating language myths that can be compared with the perpetuation of gender stereotypes in much early gender and language research. This thesis is aligned with what Androutsopoulos (2011) calls the 'second wave' of linguistic CMC studies (which is broadly synonymous with the field of study I name 'language and digital communication'). It focuses on what the language of specific Mumsnet Talk interactions can reveal about the discursive forces at work in this context, and the way Mumsnet users draw on a range of linguistic resources to negotiate these forces, but does not aim to outline the linguistic 'features' of this medium as a distinct 'form' of communication. Early 'first wave' studies are therefore rarely of particular relevance here.

A limitation of my literature review throughout is my western, anglo-centric focus. By and large, this review reflects and contributes to the very restricted focus of this study, which, in turn, reflects my own particular history, background and experiences. As a British, exclusively English-speaking researcher who has lived, worked and studied exclusively in British, English-speaking contexts, it follows that I am likely to be drawn to research within this same context. Mumsnet Talk, by and large, occupies that same sphere (see section 1.2). I am researching what I know; in ethnographic terms, I am making the familiar strange, rather than making the strange familiar (see Erickson, 1990; section 4.2.1). The merit of such a focus is the cultural and contextual knowledge and understanding I bring to my study, and my ability to draw out in-depth, context-sensitive insights by taking an observer-participant stance (see section 4.3.1). At the same time, however, I acknowledge that other

voices and perspectives are marginalised by my restricted perspective and that marginalisation is reflected in this review.

A final point of self-reflection concerns my reading and writing on the theme of 'class' (see section 3.2.5). I have been reluctant from the outset of my study to engage with class as an analytical category, yet it has persistently been brought to my attention. During the early stages of my research, colleagues working in the sociological discipline, in particular, often inquired about my views on the classed nature of Mumsnet, and were bemused by my lack of attention to a theme that seemed obviously relevant to them. My dissatisfaction with these colleagues' perceptions of class and what marks out a classed identity, or a classed space, only made me more cautious. Whilst analysing 'Can we have a child exchange?' (see chapter 6), however, I recognised some markers of wealth, education and cultural interests in the interactions of Mumsnet users that brought classed categories to the front of my mind. I realised at this point that I could not fully appreciate the way Mumsnet users were positioning themselves in this thread without paying attention to the cultural assumptions around class that may be relevant to these contributors. My subsequent reading, most of which is summarised in section 3.2.5, together with my engagement with the concept of indexicality (Ochs, 1992), led me to develop a framework for the analysis of the relevance of gender *and* class in 'Can we have a child exchange?' that was consistent with my overall theoretical outlook. My persistent deferment of a literature review on the topic of social class constitutes a good example of the value, as consistent with the grounded theory tradition, of not conducting an extensive review prior to data collection and analysis. By delaying my review of this literature, until the point at which it seemed absolutely necessary and relevant, I have been able to approach my analysis in a more open-minded way than I believe I would, had I engaged with this literature at the start of my study. I have therefore allowed the relevance of classed categories to emerge *through* my analysis, rather than presuming their significance from the outset.

3.6. Summary and conclusion

In section 3.1, I set out the aims of this literature review. The first was to situate this thesis within an academic tradition. To this end, I have shown that this thesis has relevance for, and can be situated in relation to, research in the fields of gender and language, motherhood studies, language and digital communication and parenthood and the internet. For example, I show that my theoretical outlook, my focus and my methodological approach, which is outlined in more detailed in the next chapter, are broadly aligned with contemporary trends in gender and language research, the field that has had the most impact in the construction and direction of this thesis. The themes of my research also resonate with prominent themes in other relevant fields identified here. My particular

concern with the ways of being that are available to and negotiated by, *mothers* contributing to an online discussion forum, for example, is consistent with the dominant focus in the field of motherhood studies on cultural norms and assumptions surrounding motherhood, and how they are negotiated by individuals. Finally, like many studies exploring the opportunities made possible by the affordances of digital communication across these fields, I aim to explore the way the particular resources offered by Mumsnet Talk could facilitate and/or constrain its users' opportunities to negotiate social forces, especially dominant cultural norms.

The second set of aims for this review relate to its relevance: how I aim to contribute to existing research and knowledge, and what this thesis offers that is new or different. I address these aims by narrowing my focus as this review develops, highlighting studies that are comparable with my own because they address similar cross-cutting themes, and/or adopt a similar theoretical perspective. Towards the end of section 3.3, for example, I home in on the work of Sunderland (2000) and Ellece (2012), who explore discourses of motherhood and fatherhood from both a discursive and linguistic perspective. In section 3.4.2, I draw attention to a growing body of literature that explores interactions between parents, and usually mothers, in digital contexts. What I do *not* find is studies that explore gender and parenthood in interactive digital spaces from a discursive and linguistic perspective. This thesis works to address that gap. Further, it will attempt to address a methodological gap by offering detailed explication of methods for discourse identification and analysis that are firmly rooted in linguistic analysis and poststructuralist theory. The nature of this methodological approach will be outlined in the chapter that follows.

Chapter 4. Methodology

4.1. Introduction and research design

In this chapter, I outline my research design, providing a step-by-step account to show how I developed an approach that is well matched to my aims, research site and data. I also acknowledge the influence of a range of approaches, analytical frameworks, concepts and methods that I draw on at various stages in this study. I use the term 'approaches' here to name distinctive ways of conducting research that are based on key principles (for example, qualitative and ethnographic approaches, as set out in section 4.2). 'Analytical framework' refers to a relatively flexible model or analytical structure, such as Du Bois' (2007) 'stance triangle' (see section 4.4.3), whilst 'methods' refers to more specific tools and techniques such as observation, memo writing and coding (see section 4.3). Finally, I use 'concept' to name an idea or distinctive way of capturing a phenomenon, such as indexicality (Ochs, 1992; see section 4.4.1) or double-voicing (Baxter, 2014; see section 4.4.3).

After offering a very brief overview of my research design in this section, I situate my research in a qualitative tradition, paying particular attention to the dual influence of ethnography and grounded theory (see section 4.2). I then offer an account of the key analytical frameworks, concepts and methods I draw on through two broad stages in my study: *data construction* and *identifying and analysing discourses* (sections 4.3 and 4.4). The processes involved at each of these stages are summarised in figure 4.1, below. The first stage involves constructing threads from Mumsnet Talk as data for the purposes of this study. This is a stage of discovery and exploration, where I gain an in-depth understanding of Mumsnet Talk, my self-positioning as a researcher and key themes in selected threads from the forum. The processes of systematic observation, thread sampling and initial coding at this first stage proceed in an iterative manner, so that I move back and forth between each step until I reach a point of 'saturation', where I judge that further data collection and preliminary analysis is unlikely to lead to new insights (see section 4.3). The second stage of my research design, *identifying and analysing discourses,* is where I really focus in on my aims and research questions, exploring the subject positions available to, and negotiated by, Mumsnet users through close, discursive-linguistic analysis of two threads from Mumsnet Talk. The process of close investigation and analysis at this stage proceeds in a more linear fashion, though there is some recursive movement, particularly around the process of identifying discourses. Throughout both stages, I engage with relevant literature through a continuous, iterative process (see section 3.1).

Figure 4.1. Research Design
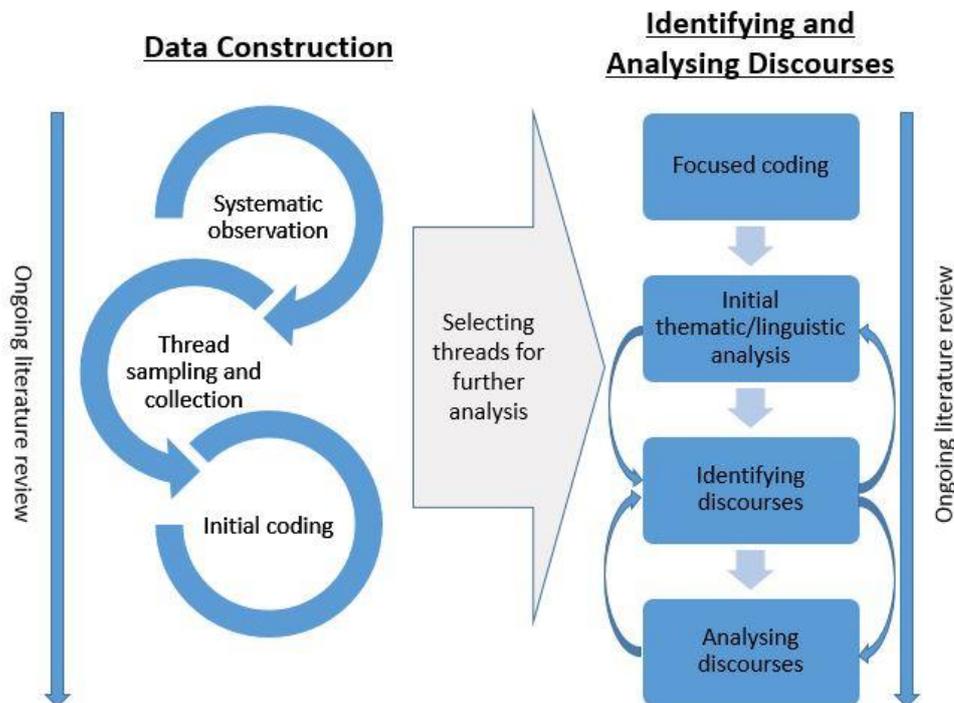
In each section of this chapter, I draw attention to the ongoing development of my research design and methods, and also my research questions, which are refined as my study progresses. I introduce the final set of research questions that inform and shape the rest of this thesis in section 4.5. In section 4.6, I explain how I negotiated ethical issues throughout this study. I then underline the importance of self-reflexivity, interrogating key decisions and highlighting moments of self-reflection and transformation in the evolution of this study (section 4.7). I conclude, in section 4.8, by briefly summarising the key elements of my research design. I delay further examination of my overall approach until section 7.5, in order to more accurately capture the emergent nature of the insights that developed through the course of this study.

4.2. Situating this study within a qualitative tradition

I situate this study within a qualitative tradition. Qualitative research tends to be small-scale, employs inductive logic, values the researcher's subjectivity and presents findings in a descriptive, non-numerical way (Robson, 2011). It can take many forms, but it is united by methodologies that 'celebrate richness, depth, nuance, context, multi-dimensionality and complexity' (J. Mason, 2002: 1). The value of qualitative approaches has been widely recognised in the sociolinguistic discipline, particularly the field of gender and language, which is rich in qualitative studies with a 'local' focus that explore multiple, fluid and heterogeneous gendered identities (see section 3.2.2).

In keeping with the qualitative paradigm, this study is structured in a flexible and emergent way. It does not begin with a pre-conceived hypothesis or a rigid methodological structure. Rather, my methodology, analysis and ultimately my findings, are emergent, being guided by the data, the aims of this study and iterative engagement with a range of literature. This can be described as a *pragmatic* research design, where the quest for a better understanding of the subject guides methodological choices (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; Dörnyei, 2007; Silverman, 2011). A qualitative, pragmatic approach is particularly appropriate in relation to the aims of this study because its flexibility supports rich, in-depth explorations of *how* particular social situations are constructed (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2008; J. Mason, 2002); in this case, what ways of being are available to Mumsnet users in their digital interactions, what contribution gender makes to parents' self-definitions, and how new possibilities for self-definition can be envisaged (see sections 1.1, 1.2 and 2.3). My qualitative, pragmatic approach is aligned with my feminist poststructuralist standpoint (see section 2.3) because it encourages me to keep my options open and embrace multiple possibilities (Baxter, 2003). This approach is supported by a self-reflexive stance that involves constant scrutiny and re-evaluation of my aims, methods and analyses, my position as a researcher and my relationship with participants (see sections 4.2.1, 4.3.4 and 4.7).

The foundational principles of openness, flexibility and emergent theory underpin the qualitative traditions of ethnography and grounded theory. These approaches both promote an inductive, iterative research design, in which data come first and the researcher moves between stages according to the emerging demands of the study, rather than proceeding in a pre-determined, linear fashion. I draw on specific methods that have developed in each of these traditions in order to realise my aims at different stages of this study. These methods are outlined in the discussion that follows, and explored in detail in sections 4.3 and 4.4.

4.2.1. Drawing on ethnographic approaches

Ethnographic methods have their origins in anthropological study, or 'naturalist ethnography' (Skeggs, 1995: 192). The naturalist tradition emerged as a response and counterpoint to the positivist paradigm, which strives towards objectivity, generalisability and standardisation, usually testing hypotheses through logic, employing prescriptive methods and proceeding in a pre-determined, linear fashion (Agar, 1995; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Hine, 2000). The goal of understanding cultures, originally, distant and/or unfamiliar cultures (Hine, 2000), is at the heart of ethnography, and many of its distinctive methods emerge as a result of this goal. To reach a point of deep understanding, for example, ethnographers generally undertake a significant period of fieldwork in a natural setting, often for around a year (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), in order to

gain 'first-hand experience' of the context (Atkinson, Coffey, Delamont, Lofland, and Lofland, 2001). This fieldwork usually involves observation, active engagement and participation, often through complete immersion in a setting (Atkinson et al., 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). When an ethnographer enters the field of interest, they traditionally do so with an open mind and no fixed goal; ethnography is not allied to a particular method and generally does not proceed from a pre-determined research design (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Hine, 2009). As understanding grows and insights emerge, the research aims and design become more refined (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007).

Because this study focuses exclusively on a digital discussion forum, it would be difficult to describe it as an ethnography in the traditional sense that is described above. I do not, for example, achieve total 'immersion' in the Mumsnet site; indeed, what might constitute immersion in such a context is unclear. I also refrain from actively contributing to the forum at all, as I will explain in section 4.3.1. Ethnography, however, is not a static or unified approach (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; J. Mason, 2002); ethnographic methods have been utilised and adapted by a range of disciplines and for a range of social inquiries (Silverman, 2011). Both Mills and Mullany (2011) and Barton and Lee (2013), for example, draw attention to the use of ethnographic approaches in gender and language and internet research, respectively. They both point to Green and Bloome's (1997) distinction between the full immersion in a culture involved in 'doing an ethnography' and the utilisation of 'ethnographic approaches' that has become common in their fields. Like many others, I therefore draw on ethnographic approaches as they are relevant to my study and aims, rather than positioning this work as a complete ethnographic study.

Although this study is not described as a 'full' or 'traditional' ethnography, its emergent, flexible design is consistent with key principles of ethnographic research. Indeed, positioning 'ethnography' as an alignment with a particular epistemology, rather than the employment of specific techniques, is becoming a popular way of conceptualising an increasingly diversified approach (Varis, 2015). This study also draws on ethnographic methods such as observation, which can offer a 'way in' to the Mumsnet Talk forum and my analysis of interactions within this space. Many internet researchers have used observation as a starting point in the study of online communities (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2008; Baym, 1993; Cherny, 1999; Hine, 2000; Taylor, 1999). The nature of such observations is necessarily adaptive; rather than observing *people* in face-to-face settings, internet ethnographers are essentially observing the written interactions they create (see Markham, 2004). In order to capture this distinction, I use Androutsopoulos' (2008) phrase 'systematic observation'. This term foregrounds my committed, focused exploration of the complex fabric of my research context at

given moments, as I experience them. It also backgrounds the notion of 'time', which is less relevant in 'chrono-malleable' (Markham, 2004: 103) digital contexts such as Mumsnet Talk, where a 'conversation' can take place over several days, weeks, or even months, yet remain focused and cohesive. The nature and purpose of my systematic observations are further explored in section 4.3.1.

4.2.2. The influence of grounded theory

Grounded theory, like ethnography, emerged in response to the positivist paradigm. It was introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as a way of developing new theory from the ground up, directly from data, rather than using data to support pre-existing theories. However, unlike ethnography, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) grounded theory remained committed to positivist principles such as procedural rigour, prescriptive techniques and objectivity (Charmaz, 2008, 2014). Nevertheless, grounded theory, like ethnography, is not a static movement, and its core principles and strategies have been utilised and adapted to serve a range of goals in varied contexts (Hutchison et al., 2010). The work of what Birks and Mills (2011) call a 'second generation' of grounded theorists such as Clarke (2003) and Charmaz (2008, 2014), for example, has moved away from the positivist assumptions of early versions of grounded theory (e.g. Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998), towards an appreciation that grounded theory analyses are not accurate representations of 'truth', but as 'interpretive renderings of a reality' (Charmaz, 2008: 206). Charmaz (2014: 13) also resists 'mechanical applications' of grounded theory methods, pointing out that grounded theorists have successfully emphasised different criteria for grounded theory research, and that grounded theory techniques can be adopted without full commitment to the principles with which they are associated.

Although it has been acknowledged that there is no one correct or consistent way of 'doing' grounded theory, many authors have attempted to summarise the quintessential principles of grounded theory that have remained central to the approach from Glaser and Strauss' (1967) original publication to Charmaz' (2014) recent adaptation (see Birks and Mills, 2011; Charmaz and Bryant, 2011; Charmaz, 2014; Hutchison et al., 2010). The basic premise to develop theory directly from data, for example, remains a core principle (Gibbs, 2002). Charmaz (2014: 14) calls this 'inductive logic', adding that all grounded theorists also subject data to 'rigorous comparative analysis' and 'aim to develop theoretical analyses' (Charmaz, 2014: 15). These principles, which overlap with core ethnographic principles, permeate my research design, allowing me to address the aim of exploring the subject positions available to, and negotiated by, Mumsnet users without closing down my options too early on. Rather, using an inductive approach, I have developed my

research methods, questions and analyses in a way that is responsive to my emerging findings and theorisation, as this chapter will show (see section 4.3.5 in particular). Grounded theory principles and methods are particularly central during the first stage of my study, 'data construction' (see section 4.3), where I adopt several specific methods associated with grounded theory in order to facilitate my early familiarisation with, and analysis of, Mumsnet Talk threads, such as memo writing (see section 4.3.4) and coding (see section 4.3.5).

My poststructuralist perspective leads me to recognise the research process itself, and any 'knowledge' produced from it, as a construction, which reflects my background, values and interpretation of the data, rather than capturing an 'empirical reality' (Charmaz, 2014: 155). As a result, I take a self-reflexive stance throughout this study, acknowledging my central position within the research project, recognising the values I bring to my research, and then critically examining these influences (Charmaz, 2008; see also J. Mason, 2002). I explore some of my self-reflections in a designated section in almost every chapter, including this one (see section 4.7). I use these sections to explain key factors that lead to particular decisions in the research process, to acknowledge some of the assumptions I bring to my interpretations (and sometimes how these interpretations have shifted over time), and to describe some of the insights that have emerged through self-reflexive engagement with the research process.

4.3. Data construction

As well as research itself, the material on which research is based, usually called 'data', is similarly a constructed phenomenon that does not exist, as 'data' at least, outside of the research process (Charmaz and Bryant, 2011; Dey, 1993; Markham, 2013). I therefore use the phrase 'data construction', rather than, for example, 'data collection', to describe this first stage of my research, where threads are taken from the Mumsnet Talk forum and constructed as data for research purposes.

The data construction stage has been a 'process of discovery' (Schutt, 2012: 322) that has directed my thinking, my understanding of the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum and the development of the research process itself, including my research questions. Through this process, I have gained insights in to the benefits of being a member of Mumsnet and contributing to the Talk forum. For example, I find that many contributors can receive both practical and emotional support in a space which, though ostensibly 'public', provides resources for anonymity and facilitates quite personal, intimate interactions (see section 4.6 and Mackenzie, forthcoming). I have found that many Mumsnet users feel a strong sense of belonging to the community, which allows them to not only explore their own

individual sense of 'identity', but to negotiate collective identities and explore what it means to be a 'mother' in a wider context.

The methods utilised during the process of data construction include systematic observation of the forum, sampling and collecting threads, coding and categorising the threads and memo writing. In keeping with the qualitative, pragmatic approach outlined in section 4.2, these processes advance semi-iteratively. For example, coding and categorisation begins before all threads have been collected, and memo writing is an ongoing activity. However, for the purpose of clarity, the different elements that constitute the process of data construction are explored separately between sections 4.3.1 and 4.3.5.

The process of data construction comes to a close with what I describe as 'saturation', defined here as the point at which further observation, data collection or analysis 'does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation' (M. Mason, 2010: n.p.; see also Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Deciding what constitutes 'saturation' also involves consideration of issues such as time, money, the scale of the project and research aims (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; M. Mason, 2010; Wiener, 2007). In terms of practical considerations, I set a limit of six months for the data construction process. This is a sixth of the time frame allowed to complete my PhD. A significantly shorter allocation may not have allowed enough time to generate the necessary data or depth of understanding required for this project; a significantly longer allocation may have resulted in the generation of too much data, and/or delayed the progress of this research.

4.3.1. Systematic observation

The data construction process for this study begins with systematic observation of the Mumsnet Talk forum (see section 4.2.1). My systematic observations of the Talk forum serve as a starting point in my study, from which my research aims and design become more refined (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The understanding I develop through systematic observation allows me to situate my analysis of specific moments of interaction within the wider context of Mumsnet Talk. It also facilitates a sensitive and thoughtful approach to analysis that is alert to the complexities, subtleties and nuances of interaction within this forum. Finally, the observation process facilitates the identification and collection of threads that will help me to discover what subject positions are available to Mumsnet users in their digital interactions (see section 4.3.2).

During an observation period of approximately five months, I visit the forum regularly (on average, one hour per weekday) and observe the discussions that are taking place, often looking only at thread titles in order to get a sense of what topics are being discussed, but also regularly reading

whole threads or parts of threads. I usually observe current activity on the forum, clicking on the 'active' thread hyperlink when I enter the site (see figure 4.2). As my observations progress, I come to position myself neither exclusively as an observer, nor a participant, but as an *observer-participant,* an intermediary position outlined by Mason (2002; see also Gold, 1958, who uses the term observer-as-participant). I position myself partly as an *observer* because I joined Mumsnet in order to pursue this study, not for personal reasons, and have never contributed to the Talk forum. Despite the fact that I have not contributed to threads, however, I have come to consider myself, to some degree, as a *participant* in this context. Because I have children myself, I often find myself engaging on a personal, as well as a professional level, with Mumsnet threads. Although I have remained a 'silent' user, I have therefore developed a sense of affiliation with the forum and its users, which means that at times I have felt very much a part of the Mumsnet community (see section 4.6).

Figure 4.2. Links to Mumsnet Talk's 'active' and featured threads, accessed 01.06.2014 (hyperlinked text marked in blue).

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Illustration removed for copyright restrictions

Some key insights garnered through observation, and developed through subsequent reflection and analysis, include my growing understanding and appreciation of the norms of participation, interaction and sharing within the Talk forum. Observing the site through the eyes of a participant, for example, I have been able to recognise that my research has the potential to cause harm through violation of users' expectations. Such insights have had a significant effect on the ethical decision-making process for this study (see section 4.6). Another observation I make during this period, and consider in more detail through my second stage of analysis, is that Mumsnet users seem, almost exclusively, to identify themselves as 'women', whereas 'men' appear to be largely absent from the forum (see section 5.2.2).

4.3.2. Sampling threads

As is common in much qualitative research, sampling in this study is not primarily driven by issues of representativeness, sample size, generalisability or external validity, but by the existing and evolving demands of my research (see Charmaz, 2014; Clarke, 2003; Robson, 2011). My sampling method can be described as 'purposive', whereby 'decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria' (Oliver, 2006: 244). By making selective decisions, I am able to build a corpus of threads that satisfies the particular needs of my study (Robson, 2011). My criteria for the purposive selection of threads are based on my research questions, which have evolved over time, but during the early stages of data construction, read thus:

1. How is '**mother**' constructed as a **gendered** subject position within Mumsnet Talk interactions?
2. Do certain **'norms' of motherhood** prevail in Mumsnet users' digital interactions?
3. How are Mumsnet users positioned, and how do they position themselves, in relation to discourses?

I keep a copy of my preliminary research questions close to hand throughout the process of data construction (and indeed, throughout the entire research process), and focus on the words highlighted in bold. These questions remind me of the aims of my study and guide my choice of threads for further exploration. The key term 'mother', for example, prompts me to search for a range of naming devices associated with the family, including 'mother' and its variants, such as 'mum' and 'mummy', but also categories such as 'parent', 'father', 'husband', 'wife' and 'child', and their variants. These are flexible guidelines; many threads are of potential interest even though their titles do not directly employ any of the categories outlined above. For example, in the thread title 'My 7 year old cries constantly and it's driving me insane', a naming device is used for a child ('My 7 year old') and the contributor's reaction to the child – being 'driven insane' – is foregrounded. Reading between the lines, I select this thread because I believe that constructions of 'motherhood' are likely to be very relevant here. The key term 'gendered' reminds me to look closely at threads whose titles seem to make gender relevant. Any thread title using gendered familial categories, such as 'mother' or 'father' (or their variants) does this; so, for example, the thread titles 'Your identity as a mother' and 'Your only purpose as a woman is to give birth' meet both the 'mother' and 'gender' criteria. The phrase 'norms of motherhood' has been less useful as a selection criterion; in practice, the terms 'mother' and 'gender' have been sufficient for this purpose. Consideration of 'norms' becomes more relevant in later coding, categorisation and microlinguistic analysis, though I ultimately remove the word 'norms' from my research questions, focusing instead on *discourses*, which become the focus for analyses as my research develops (see section 4.5).

In order to keep my searches relatively open, I do not develop any more specific sampling criteria; I am aware that constructions of motherhood may not always appear in obvious guises or predictable places. Often, during the observation and sampling processes, which are closely related, my attention wanders to threads I find to be of personal interest, or which simply catch my eye, without any real consideration of whether they may relate to my preliminary research questions. At such moments, my position as both an observer and a participant becomes particularly apparent (see section 4.3.1). My strategy of making focused selections of threads combined with what might be described as interest-driven engagement with the site has been a useful way of both gaining an in-depth understanding of the nature of interactions within the Talk forum and identifying threads of interest in relation to my aims and research questions. Extracts 4.1 and 4.2, from memos written during the process of observation and sampling, show how I apply the sampling strategies described above in practice.

Extract 4.1. Excerpt from a memo written on 19.05.2014, after selecting a thread titled 'DS keeps calling me Mum but I want to be Mummy'

```
I chose this thread, as with so many others, both because it struck a personal
chord and because I thought it might have some interesting discussion on what it
means to be a 'mum'/ 'mummy'. On a personal note, I also have a strong desire to be
called 'mummy' by my two children, and had never really considered why. They have
both called me various other things but I also prefer 'mummy'. 'Mummy' struck me as
quite a feminine term and I wondered if this contributed to my own and others'
preference for it.
```

Extract 4.2. Excerpt from a memo written on 15.08.2014, after selecting a thread titled 'Considering another baby and thinking of DH taking 'mat leave' instead of me'

```
I was immediately drawn to this thread because, on a personal level, I think it's
fantastic that parents now have the option to do this, and I've often thought that
I'd ask my husband to do this if we had another child. I also thought this thread
may offer 'alternative' perspectives on bringing up children, that might contest
existing 'norms' and that contributors may question the gendered division of
parenting roles.
```

As I collect and code more threads, I begin to seek out examples that offer new or different perspectives, that will enrich my growing corpus rather than replicate the content I already have. Thus, my sampling methods became more aligned with the 'theoretical sampling' associated with grounded theory. This process 'focuses on finding *new data sources…* that can best explicitly address specific theoretically interesting facets of the emergent analysis' (Clarke, 2003: 577, her emphasis).

4.3.3. Collecting and storing threads

I use QSR International's qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 10 (2012), to preserve sampled threads in a static format, which can be accessed for later reference and analysis. Using NVivo's 'NCapture' function, I save threads in their original format and transfer them into an NVivo project space. By using this function, rather than copying and pasting text into a word file or using

screenshots, for example, I am able to retain threads from the Mumsnet discussion forum in full, including all the idiosyncrasies of their original context. I integrate new threads into my project space over time, so that it gradually comes to resemble the kind of 'log' of interaction that Herring (2004) places at the centre of her 'Computer Mediated Discourse Analysis'. I describe this collection as a 'corpus', which I define as a structured set of naturally occurring texts, albeit quite a small one in this instance. Once threads have been captured and saved in this way, I am able to access, annotate and code them within my NVivo project space.

I arrive at a sense that I have reached a point of saturation in the data collection process through continual reflection. Whilst conducting observations, preliminary readings and analyses of threads, I notice a gradual change in the nature of my activities. I collect the first twenty threads, for example, in the space of a few weeks. At this early stage, it is difficult to limit my choices, as so many threads seem to meet my selection criteria (see section 4.3.2). As I collect more and more threads, however, the rate of selection slows significantly. In a memo written at the time (extract 4.3), I attribute this change to two factors: my growing expertise in the data collection process and my desire to collect a varied and diverse corpus of threads.

Extract 4.3. Excerpt from a memo written on 02.07.2014

```
As I become more familiar with the website, I get better at choosing threads that
are relevant for my research questions, and become more and more selective… Many
threads are beginning to repeat similar themes. It's becoming increasingly
difficult to select relevant threads that add something new to my collection. I
don't want lots of threads on the same topic.
```

By the time I have collected 40 threads, it has become a challenge to find any additional data that contribute something new to my corpus. When my collection reaches the mid-40s, I am confident that collecting more than 50 threads will become 'a superfluous exercise' (Gibbs, 2002: 166), with the same themes being reproduced in different ways. This feeling is later echoed through the coding and categorising process (see section 4.3.5), when my generation of new nodes slows as I analyse more threads, and again, after the 40th thread, almost comes to a complete halt. After collecting 50 threads, I feel confident that I have constructed a diverse collection that will allow me to address my central aim of exploring the ways of being that are available to and negotiated by Mumsnet users in their digital interactions. At this point, I have plenty of data to work with, but am aware that if I continue, my data collection could become unmanageable, especially as some threads are very long. These practical considerations are an important factor in my decision making, and have been taken into account alongside my research aims.

4.3.4. Memo writing

Memos are a form of written record associated with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), although they are also akin to the field notes associated with ethnographic research. I write memos throughout the data construction process for a range of purposes. For example, I use them to record my thoughts, reflections and developing interpretations and to justify my sampling decisions (see section 4.3.3). In keeping with the grounded theory tradition, these notes tend to be quite detailed and sometimes include analytical comments (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The process of memo writing is well suited to my digital research context because I am able to take 'time out' of my observations to write memos without leaving or disturbing the research setting. Equally, useful insights often surface later, after leaving the research site, and sometimes unexpectedly. Thus, my memo writing is not dictated by time or place, but by emerging insights, whenever these may occur (see Charmaz, 2014). I keep my memos in a digital format for reasons of security and accessibility, writing them first on a digital notepad, then uploading them to my NVivo project space, where I can create digital links with specific threads or nodes.

The process of memo writing supports my self-reflexive approach, providing opportunities to examine my role as a 'constructor' of data (J. Mason, 2002: 99). By writing memos, I bring myself in to the analysis, reflecting on factors that I believe might influence my feelings towards and interpretations of data. By storing memos as part of a collection of linked materials within my NVivo project space, I have constructed a transparent account of the research process, to which I have since returned on many occasions, particularly when writing this chapter. Writing memos has supported the development of some important insights in my study, such as my emerging understanding of the norms of interaction and information sharing within this site (see section 4.6).

4.3.5. Initial and axial coding

As I collect threads within my NVivo project space, I begin to re-read and code them. Coding involves, in a very general sense, assigning descriptive labels, or 'codes', to different parts of a text, which usually leads to the recognition of patterns and themes as more and more text is coded. It has been described by many grounded theorists as a process that fractures the data, before bringing it back together in new and meaningful ways (Charmaz, 2014; Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). My early coding of the Mumsnet Talk threads, although I did not conceptualise it as such at the time, is aligned with what Charmaz (2014) calls 'initial coding'. This process involves close reading and line-by-line coding of the threads, and the identification of initial codes to capture themes that emerge from this close reading. I assign coded references to 'nodes': digital holding

points within my NVivo workspace. From this point, I use the term 'theme' to name recurring ideas, or groups of ideas, statements, beliefs or values, 'code' to describe the action of coding, 'node' to name the holding place for coded text and 'reference' for coded data. Figure 4.3 provides an example of a node created at the data construction stage, and some of the references captured within it.

Figure 4.3. The node 'Your only purpose as a woman is to give birth' and some of its references
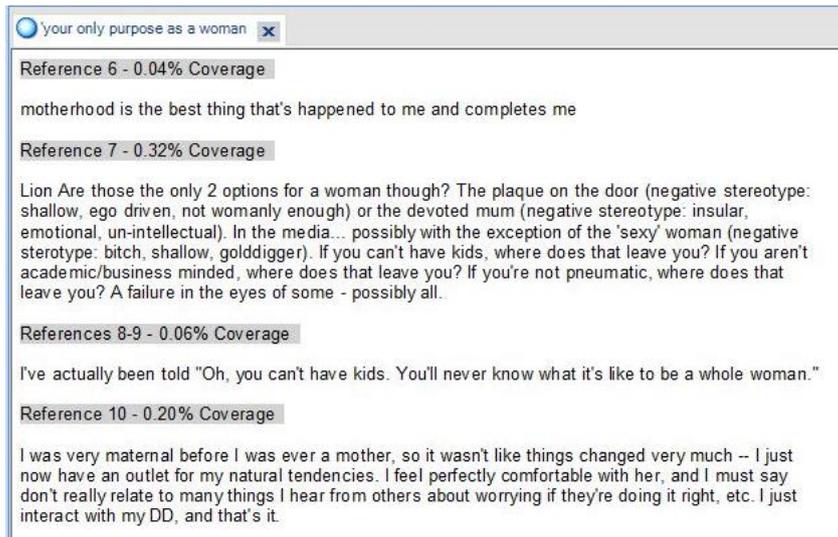
My initial aim in coding the corpus of 50 threads is to conceptualise what I am reading, to interrogate the data and to organise my growing corpus of threads in a thematic way. I begin the coding process without any *a priori* codes or categories, so as not to 'confine [my] reading of the text' (Bazeley, 2007: 76), or 'impose a framework' on my analysis (Charmaz, 2014: 150). This is in keeping with my commitment to an emergent and inductive research design (see section 4.2). My aims and research questions, however, do influence my early coding. For example, several of the nodes I create after the close reading and coding of ten threads are closely related to my research questions as they stand at this time, such as:

- motherhood 'norm' (see Research Question 2);
- contradicting motherhood 'norm' (see RQ2);
- negotiating 'norms' of motherhood (see RQ2);
- resisting or contesting norms (see RQ2);
- gender relevance (see RQ1);
- constructions of mother and motherhood (RQ1).

As I collect more threads and engage with further close reading and coding, I not only create new, but also modify, refine and adjust existing nodes. For example, as some of my early nodes, such as

'constructions of mother and motherhood', become overloaded, I develop new nodes that capture more specific themes, such as:

- mothers act intuitively;
- mothers want to look after, care for and protect their children;
- fathers are forgetful and incompetent;
- mothers are guided by experts;
- mothers are associated with 'feminine' qualities and language;
- mothers are slim, healthy and attractive.

Through this coding process, I begin to gain a sense of what 'norms' of motherhood, as I describe them at the time, are present in my corpus of threads from Mumsnet Talk. The process of coding also, and importantly, informs the development of my research questions themselves, as I will show at the end of this sub-section. This coding progresses alongside observation and data collection, but with a slight delay between the two, so that coding continues after I have selected my full corpus of threads.

After collecting and coding 50 threads, I take a 'pit stop' (Bazeley, 2007), pausing the coding process in order to reflect upon and re-evaluate the research process and re-engage with relevant literature. For example, I revisit and further investigate literature related to grounded theory at this point. In addition, after recognising many similarities between my nodes and key themes in the 'motherhood' literature (see section 3.3), I also revisit and develop my reading on this topic. Such iterative engagement with literature is common in grounded theory, which would, in its early form, begin with no *a priori* assumptions at all (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Grounded theorists now tend to accept that a preliminary literature review will usually be necessary in the current academic climate, but expect researchers will return to the literature later in the development of the grounded theory, as insights emerge and develop (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; see section 3.1).

When I return to my data set, I am able to distinguish the beginning of a second stage of coding, which no longer involves scrutinising each thread in detail, but is now focused on re-engaging with threads *through* the nodes I have created. The NVivo 10 (2012) software facilitates this process; because NVivo's nodes store *references* to the coded data, rather than the data itself, I am able to interact with the data, moving from node, to original source, to memo, for example, and also deleting, re-naming, creating and re-organising nodes with relative ease. During this process, at times it has been useful to search my entire corpus of threads using NVivo's 'text search' function, which identifies all occurrences of a particular word or phrase in the data. For example, I find a significant number of references for the contrasting nodes 'enacting stereotypically 'feminine' qualities and language' with the help of a text search. After collecting a number of references and

identifying some key recurring words such as 'lovely', 'adorable', 'broody', 'squishy' and 'hugs', a text search identifies all occurrences of these terms within my data set. I have also used text searches to check hunches (Gibbs, 2002). For example, after re-engaging with some 'motherhood' literature dealing with themes of guilt and failure (e.g. Johnston and Swanson, 2007; Wall, 2010) and spotting a reference to 'guilt' in a node review, I conduct a search for the terms 'guilt', 'failure' and 'ashamed' to see if there are more similar references in my data set. These searches are a useful way of finding relevant references very quickly at a stage when I know the data well enough to have a good idea of central themes and salient linguistic presences.

During the process of re-engaging with my nodes and their references, I re-name most of them. At times, I find that Mumsnet users' own words capture a concept in more succinct and compelling terms than mine. On such occasions, I use their words as 'in vivo' node titles; labels taken directly from the words of participants. By using in vivo node titles such as 'don't beat yourself up' and 'your only purpose as a woman is to give birth', I allow my participants' voices to be heard alongside my own, thus anchoring analysis in my participants' worlds (Charmaz, 2014). The most significant change to my naming of nodes, however, is due to a shift from identifying themes or 'types' of person to identifying actions and processes.

Many of my initial node titles, such as the examples offered above, persistently label parents. On reviewing these nodes, it begins to strike me that these titles resemble a list of 'characteristics' of mothers (and sometimes fathers); that I am casting parents, as Charmaz (2014) suggests this style of coding will do, with static labels. I also begin to realise that these titles are gender-specific, naming mothers specifically, when in fact there are many references to fathers in the threads that could be coded at the same nodes. This contradicts my aim to problematise dichotomous gender relations and gendered language (see sections 1.3.2 and 1.4). I therefore begin to move away from node titles such as 'mothers are…', 'mothers want…', 'mothers need…', and so on, which make universal assertions from isolated references. Instead, I adjust and refine my nodes so that they code actions and processes. Table 4.1. illustrates this point by juxtaposing some of these initial and revised nodes.

Table 4.1. A comparison of initial and revised nodes

Initial nodes	Revised nodes
Mothers act intuitively	Acting intuitively
Mothers are creative	Being creative
Fathers are forgetful and incompetent	Forgetting your children
Mothers are guided by experts	Valuing expert advice
Mothers are calm, in control and responsible	Being calm, in control and responsible
Mothers are slim, healthy and attractive	Wanting to be slim, healthy and attractive

As well as refining the structure of individual nodes and their references, I begin to organise my nodes in terms of hierarchies and relationships at this point. Thus, I move from a long list of 'free' nodes that are not connected to one another to what Gibbs (2002) and Bazeley (2007) call a 'tree' system. What this means is that I begin to look for broader, superordinate themes - 'categories' - that can encapsulate a number of the more specific themes - sub-categories - created through the coding process so far. Strauss and Corbin (1998: 123) describe this process as 'axial coding'. The branches of the 'tree' can become more intricate where sub-categories, such as 'caring for children is a shared responsibility' become categories themselves, as shown in Figure 4.4. Figure 4.5 displays all the categories created through the data construction process (see Appendix C for a full list, including all sub-categories).

Figure 4.4. Node tree for the category 'negotiating or rejecting gender roles'

negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
being uncertain about or against having children	5	83
caring for children is a shared responsibility	26	410
sharing responsibility between family	15	64
sharing responsibility between parents	21	96
sharing responsibility between the wider community	1	26
sharing responsibility between women	10	43
father as main parent	5	27
sharing household duties	4	22
swearing	34	120
using gender-neutral terminology	30	134
working mothers	16	110

Figure 4.5. Final list of categories created at the data construction stage

Nodes

Name	Sources	References
constructing identities	41	556
describing or enacting gender roles	49	1368
describing or enacting parenting 'norms'	49	1833
factors influencing parenting 'norms'	31	382
negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms'	43	1008

The process of creating, refining and integrating nodes facilitates my developing interpretations of individual threads and my understanding of this corpus of threads as a whole. It also significantly influences the development of my study. Through the process of coding, I am forced to face myself. The nodes I create both reflect and influence my interpretations, showing what views, values and assumptions I bring to my reading and analysis. Most notably, the coding process leads me to recognise that I often *impose* gender on my reading and coding of threads at this early stage. Further, I have been able to recognise problems with a focus on identifying 'norms' of motherhood. Firstly, the notion of 'norms' assumes that there is a clear-cut divide between that which is 'normal'

and that which is not. This assumption is not consistent with the feminist poststructuralist view that power relations are shifting and multiple, rather than dichotomous and relatively fixed (see sections 2.3 and 2.4). I also begin to question how I am identifying 'norms', and to recognise that I am imposing *my* assumptions about 'norms' of motherhood on to my interpretations of threads. These shifts in my understanding, together with ongoing engagement with poststructuralist theory, lead me to make some changes to my research questions at this point. For example, I rework the research question 'How is 'mother' constructed as a gendered subject position within Mumsnet Talk interactions?' (see section 4.3.2), so that it becomes 'Is parenting gendered in everyday digital interactions? If so, how?' This question no longer works from the premise that motherhood *is* gendered in Mumsnet Talk. The research question 'Do certain 'norms' of motherhood prevail in Mumsnet users' digital interactions?' is removed entirely at this point, and replaced by the question 'What discourses are at play in Mumsnet interactions?' By focusing on discourses rather than norms here, I allow more scope for the exploration of multiple and competing social forces. These research questions are further developed through the process of identifying and analysing discourses in two specific threads from Mumsnet Talk (see section 4.4)

4.3.6. Selecting threads for further analysis

The data construction stage is a springboard for the next stage of my research design: identifying and analysing discourses. At this second stage, I focus in on just two threads, conducting a detailed, qualitative analysis that is sensitive to the fluid and shifting ways in which individuals can be discursively positioned, and position themselves, through interaction. In order to identify these threads, I focus on the research question that at this point reads: 'is parenting gendered in everyday digital interactions? If so, how?' This question, which (in a slightly different form) also informed my sampling of threads (see section 4.3.2), again provides a clear focus for data selection at this stage: gender and gendered linguistic forms.

My focus on gender leads me to return to the following categories, which have been created through the coding process (see section 4.3.5). Both of these categories, and their sub-categories, foreground gender:

- 'describing or enacting gender roles', which includes the sub-categories:
  - being a 'good mum';
  - enacting stereotypically 'feminine' qualities and language;
  - mother as main parent;
  - 'women should be homemakers';
  - 'your only purpose as a woman is to give birth'.

- 'negotiating or rejecting gender roles', which includes the sub-categories:
  - being uncertain about or against having children;
  - caring for children is a shared responsibility;
  - father as main parent;
  - sharing household duties;
  - using gender-neutral terminology.

I identify threads that have a high number of references coded to these nodes for further exploration.

Further, I begin to turn my attention to the discursive forces that may be at play in my corpus of threads by identifying points at which the forms of knowledge, power and/or subjectivity represented by different nodes merge, interrelate or compete (see section 2.4.1). I identify these moments by conducting matrix coding queries within my NVivo project space to discover the points at which nodes intersect. For example, a matrix coding query reveals that a number of references from the 'enacting stereotypically 'feminine' qualities and language' node are also coded at the following nodes:

- sharing responsibility between the wider community (12 references from a possible 26);
- 'I love my children' (20 references from a possible 55);
- being positive about… your children (45 references from a possible 150);
- 'your only purpose as a woman is to give birth' (26 references from a possible 143);
- being negative about your children (24 references from a possible 131), and
- identifying as a mum (37 references from a possible 237).

and that references from the 'using gender-neutral terminology' node are also coded to these nodes:

- identifying as a parent (27 references from a possible 246);
- 'I'm not just a mother' (12 references from a possible 141);
- mother as main parent (15 references from a possible 246);
- being in a heterosexual relationship (25 references from a possible 443);
- caring for children is a shared responsibility (19 references from a possible 410), and
- looking after mothers' needs (9 references from a possible 313).

These queries help me to identify points at which different forms of knowledge, power and subjectivity seem to intersect in relation to Mumsnet users' adoption of language that indexes, or does *not* index, gender. They also draw my attention to threads where Mumsnet users explore and negotiate different subject positions, such as 'mother', 'parent' and 'main parent'.

This exploration of key nodes and categories leads me to select the threads 'Your identity as a mother' and 'Can we have a child exchange?' for further analysis at the next stage of my study. Within the thread 'Your identity as a mother', I identify repeated convergence between the nodes

'enacting stereotypically 'feminine' qualities and language', 'identifying as a mum' and 'I'm not just a mother'. This suggests that drawing on cultural stereotypes around gender may be central to participants' self-positioning as 'mothers' in this thread. However, the nodes 'using gender-neutral terminology' and 'identifying as a parent' also repeatedly intersect in this thread, which suggests that there are also moments where gender is *not* relevant to participants here. These findings suggest that 'Your identity as a mother' may be a fruitful site for the exploration of the research question 'Is parenting gendered in everyday digital interactions? If so, how?' because it seems that its contributors draw on multiple relations between 'gender' and 'parenthood'. 'Can we have a child exchange?' is also identified as a thread of particular interest because it has such a high occurrence of references coded to the node 'enacting stereotypically 'feminine' qualities and language', intersecting most often with the nodes 'being positive about… your children' and 'being negative about your children'. These findings again suggest that the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread may be a fruitful site for the exploration of the research question 'Is parenting gendered in everyday digital interactions? If so, how?' because they point to a link between 'enacting femininity', as I describe it at the time, and describing children. These threads are reproduced (with adjustments made for ethical reasons – see section 4.6) in Appendices D and E.

My interest in the threads named above is confirmed when I re-read them as a whole. The title of the thread 'Your identity as a mother' invites contributors very explicitly to address their self-positioning as 'mothers', which they do, providing me with an opportunity to explore Mumsnet users' conscious self-positioning as mothers, or their resistance of this subject position, the meta-language surrounding 'motherhood' and 'identity' and, importantly, the relationship between participants' language choices and their 'conscious' positioning (or not) as 'mothers'. 'Can we have a child exchange?' contrasts with this first thread in many ways; here, participants do not directly address the themes of 'motherhood' or 'identity'. Where 'Your identity as a mother' includes quite an earnest discussion about participants' identities, 'Can we have a child exchange?' is made up of largely playful, light-hearted, witty exchanges. Analysing this thread therefore allows me to explore what participants' language choices reveal about their self-positioning as 'mothers' (or not) when they are *not* consciously reflecting on their sense of self. Analysing two quite different interactional moments in Mumsnet Talk supports my overall aim of exploring the ways of being available, to and negotiated by, Mumsnet users because it provides more space for diversity within quite a focused, qualitative context. Examining two contrasting threads also provides more opportunity to capture something of the spirit of Mumsnet Talk interactions in this thesis.

4.4. Identifying and analysing discourses in Mumsnet Talk

After selecting two threads for further analysis, my study becomes much more focused. I have a good understanding of the Talk forum and have constructed and coded a small corpus of threads from the site. My aims have been clarified and my research questions refined, so that they now read thus:

1. Is parenting gendered in Mumsnet interactions? If so, how and why?
2. What discourses are at play in Mumsnet interactions?
   2a. What methods are best suited to the identification of discourses in Mumsnet Talk?
3. How do Mumsnet users position themselves, and how are they positioned, in relation to these discourses?

These research questions now hinge on the central challenge to identify and analyse discourses in moments of interaction from Mumsnet Talk, which is the focus for this second stage of my study. This discursive focus means that I interpret the 'ways of being' available to Mumsnet users very explicitly as subject positions that are constituted by and within discourses. I also introduce research question 2a for the first time at this point. This question arises from my growing recognition that 'identifying discourses' is neither a straightforward, nor well-documented process (see section 2.4.2). By foregrounding and evaluating the *methods* I use to answer research question 2, I hope to shed light on this process in a way that will be valuable to other scholars working within a discursive framework in a range of sociolinguistic fields.

The analytical process that supports my identification and analysis of discourses in Mumsnet Talk is detailed in the sections that follow. This is a cumulative process, in which my analysis gradually builds and develops, and each step relies on the insights of previous analyses. As a result, the steps I take proceed in a more linear fashion than the previous stage, though there is still some recursive movement. I develop my identification of discourses and analysis of the mechanisms through which they operate concurrently. To use Sunderland's (2000: 255) words, 'discourses are both the object and the result' of my analysis (see section 2.4.3). What this means in practice is that I work to analyse discourses before I am even sure that they are there, and it is only through investigative and inductive analysis that I come to any conclusions about their presence.

At this second stage, I increasingly move beyond the specific methods traditionally associated with ethnography and grounded theory. I draw on a wider range of influences in order to develop effective analytical strategies that are flexible and sensitive to context, and to conceptualise my emerging analytical interpretations. Linguistic analysis also takes centre stage at this point, in line with my claim that discourses are best identified and analysed through close attention to language (see section 2.3.2). However, the principles of flexibility and emergence remain central to the

analytical process. For example, the analytical methods I adopt, and the particular language features upon which I focus, are influenced by the context of my study, particularly my aims and research questions, and are guided by the nature of the threads I analyse. This is consistent with Reisigl and Wodak's (2009: 89) claim that the methodological choices of a discourse analyst 'depend on the specific problem' they investigate (see section 2.4.2).

4.4.1. Focused and theoretical coding of selected threads

I begin the process of identifying and analysing discourses in my selected threads through what Charmaz (2014) calls 'focused coding'. This form of coding involves clarifying 'the theoretical centrality of certain ideas' by 'distinguishing those codes that have greater analytical power' (Charmaz, 2014: 140). My focused coding of selected threads can be described as an accelerated version of the initial and axial coding described in section 4.3.5. To begin with, I create 'free nodes' to group related references from each thread, paying attention to both content and recurring linguistic structures. As the number of free nodes grows, I begin to see relationships between nodes, and organise them in hierarchical 'trees'. As before, I code flexibly and reflexively, merging, refining and altering nodes as I go, though now, as a more experienced coder, and having been through key moments of insight during the initial coding process, there are fewer adjustments to be made along the way. I focus on each thread separately, with a view to instigating rich, in-depth qualitative analyses of each individual thread, before bringing insights from these analyses together at a later stage in my study (see chapter 7).

As my focused coding of two selected threads develops, I start to theorise about larger structures at work in these digital interactions. I begin to conceptualise some nodes as 'theoretical nodes', which are 'integrative' and begin to tell an 'analytic story' (Charmaz, 2014: 150). Some of the theoretical nodes I identify at this stage stand out because they contain a high number of aggregated references, such as 'total motherhood' ('Your identity as a mother') and 'the classified advertisement frame' ('Can we have a child exchange?'). Others contain relatively few references, but are nevertheless identified as analytically significant. For example, the 'equality between parents' node ('Your identity as a mother') is identified as significant because it contrasts so sharply with the 'total motherhood' node. The node 'references to men' ('Your identity as a mother') is identified as significant *because* it has so few references. The presence of this node shows that men are sometimes made relevant in this thread, but the comparatively low number of references to men, compared with the number of references participants make to themselves and other women, points to a conspicuous absence of men across the thread. Thus, as well as supporting the identification of prominent themes and linguistics features in each thread, the focused and

theoretical coding process also supports the identification of relatively *absent* themes and linguistic features. This attention to peripheral nodes and 'absences' is an important element of my analysis as it is not just what is *said,* but what is *not said;* not just what is central or dominant, but what is peripheral or marginalised, that can point to the presence of discourses (see section 2.4.3). The nodes created at this stage are listed in Appendices F and G.

At this stage, I identify the following theoretical nodes from my coding of 'Your identity as a mother' for further exploration:

- total motherhood;
- child-centricity;
- individuality;
- reference to men, and
- equality between parents.

And the following theoretical nodes from my coding of 'Can we have a child exchange?':

- child centricity;
- indexing class;
- indexing gender, and
- the classified advertisement frame.

These sets of theoretical nodes begin to reveal, in each case, an 'analytic story' (Charmaz, 2014) that is later explored through further qualitative analysis (see sections 4.4.2 – 4.4.4). The analytic story that begins to take shape through my coding of 'Can we have a child exchange?' is particularly striking and involves a good deal of in-depth theorisation and analysis at this stage. The theoretical nodes relating to 'Can we have a child exchange?' capture my growing recognition that contributors to this thread draw on distinctive sets of resources that bring to my mind, in the first instance, the genre of classified advertisements; short written advertisements traditionally found in the 'classified' section of print newspapers, and in the second instance, cultural stereotypes surrounding gender and class (see sections 6.1.1 and 6.2.1). In order to make sense of these patterns in relation to Mumsnet users' discursive positioning in this thread, I turn to Ochs' (1992) concept of indexicality and Goffman's (1974) frame analysis. Subsequently, I conceptualise the features I associate with class and gender as 'indices' – resources that have come, through shared cultural knowledge, to be stereotypically associated with a particular gender or classed group (see section 3.2.4). Where participants draw on resources that are indicative not of a cultural stereotype, but of the classified advertisement genre, I conceptualise their linguistic behaviour as 'keying', whereby the conventions of a 'frame' – an activity governed by specific 'principles of organization' (Goffman, 1974: 10) – are transposed to the context of a thread within Mumsnet Talk. The processes of indexing and keying

are distinct in this thread to the extent that 'indexing' involves pointing to, and positioning oneself in relation to, wider social constructs – in this case 'gender' and 'class' - whereas 'keying' involves the replaying of a set of ritualistic conventions associated with a specific genre such as the classified advertisement. Both frameworks, however, support the analytical process of identifying the meanings that can be implicated by particular linguistic resources.

Focused and theoretical coding provides me with, as Charmaz (2014: 141) puts it, the 'skeleton' of my analysis: a point from which I can move forward and add flesh to the analytical bones I have constructed. The identification of key theoretical nodes, in particular, brings me to the next step in this stage of my research design, where I move away from the coding process and focus on qualitative, microlinguistic analysis of selected threads.

4.4.2. Initial thematic/linguistic analysis

I develop my analysis by tracking references from the theoretical nodes identified at the previous step (see section 4.4.1) through each selected thread in turn. I move away from my digital NVivo project space at this point, printing out each thread on paper and using coloured pens to trace each theoretical node through the threads. At first, I explore each node separately, focusing in on the linguistic features of each group of references. This analysis is relatively free and unstructured; in keeping with my inductive approach, I do not set out to investigate pre-established linguistic features, but to discover which features emerge as significant in relation to my research questions. I *am* guided, however, by a focus on the discursive nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 2.4.1); that is, whether and how particular forms of knowledge are constituted, whether and how Mumsnet users are positioned in particular subject positions and whether and how power relations are inscribed. Through this analytical process, I develop my theorisation about wider structures at work in the threads, my focus shifting from the identification and analysis of 'theoretical nodes' to the identification and analysis of 'potential discourses'. The results of these microanalytic investigations are explored in sections 5.2.1, 5.2.2 and 6.2.1.

I tend to use the terms 'theme' (see section 4.3.5) and 'potential discourse' as intermediary labels at this point in my analysis; as bridging points between identifying important ideas or statements in my selected threads and making confident claims about the presence of 'discourses', as they are defined in sections 1.3.1 and 2.4. A group of statements around the node 'individuality', for example, may first be identified as a theme, and then, where indications are found that this group of statements seems to position subjects, a potential discourse, and finally as a discourse, once its discursive nature is more fully evidenced in the text, at the next analytical step (see section 4.4.3).

4.4.3. Identifying discourses in the threads

I move forward with the second stage of my study by exploring moments at which potential discourses interrelate, converge and compete in each thread. Identifying and exploring such moments is of particular relevance for the identification and analysis of discourses because, as I suggest in section 2.4.2, discourses are by their very nature likely to be interwoven, but also oppositional. At this point, I shift from analyses that are focused around theoretical nodes to analyses that focus on whole posts. Having identified some potential discourses, I seek to find further evidence for, and analyse these structures through, an analysis that is again centred on the nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 2.4.1). I realise this analytical focus, and more confidently identify the discourses at work in my selected threads, by focusing on the resources, linguistic or otherwise, that individuals deploy in their discursive positioning of self and other (Davies and Harré, 1990; see section 2.4). The results of these analyses are set out in sections 5.2.3, 5.2.4, 6.2.2 and 6.2.3.

My analysis of the 'Your identity as a mother' thread, in particular, suggests that evaluation is a key resource by which contributors work to position themselves and others. In order to understand the significance of this resource, I turn to the work of Du Bois (2007). Du Bois' 'stance triangle' focuses the analyst's attention on how individuals are *intersubjectively* positioned; that is, how individuals are positioned *through* their relation to others. This framework offers a useful analytical companion to Davies and Harré's (1990) positioning theory, which also focuses on the way individuals are positioned through interaction*.* Both frameworks draw attention to the particular *resources* individuals can draw on to position themselves and others, but Du Bois (2007) focuses specifically on evaluation as an interactional resource. Through evaluation, he suggests, individuals are able to position themselves and align with others (see figure 4.6). His concept of alignment is useful for my description of Mumsnet users' positioning in relation to others, which may be positively aligned, negatively aligned, or at some point along a continuous scale between the two.

Figure 4.6. Du Bois' (2007: 163) 'stance triangle'

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My analysis of 'Your identity as a mother' also leads me to suggest that contributors position themselves by drawing on the words, or presumed thoughts, of others, both directly and indirectly, through 'double-voicing' (Baxter, 2014). Baxter (2014: 4) suggests that double-voicing involves bringing together one individual's thoughts and intentions with those of another, in contrast with 'single-voicing', whereby 'the orientation of the speaker is principally to themselves and to perpetuating their own agenda, rather than to engaging with the interests and concerns of others'. Baxter (2014) lists five types of double-voicing, each of which serve slightly different functions. In my analysis, I recognise two of these types, 'anticipatory double-voicing', which serves to 'anticipate and dilute possible criticism', and 'dialogic double-voicing', whereby ideas are debated 'as if the speaker is both the addresser and the addressee' (Baxter, 2014: 5). My analysis of 'Your identity as a mother' and 'Can we have a child exchange?' leads me to add another function to Baxter's list, which I call *affiliative* double-voicing. I use this term to describe interaction that is oriented towards positive alignment with others, usually through a linguistic strategy variously called 'dialogic syntax' (Du Bois, 2014) or 'matching and mirroring' (Coates, 1996), whereby individuals echo or repeat the words or structures of one another's utterances.

My developing analyses of the way Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to discourses and in relation to others leads me to recognise and emphasise the resources that are available to users in order to negotiate their discursive subjectivity. Some of these resources are associated with the affordances of the Talk forum itself. My consideration of these points, alongside my engagement with literature that considers the way social forces can be negotiated in online spaces (see section 3.4.2), leads me to develop an additional research question, which initially reads: 'Does Mumsnet

Talk offer particular resources that facilitate and/or constrain Mumsnet users' opportunities to challenge, resist or negotiate dominant discourses, and open up new ways of being?' This question emphasises the importance of the themes introduced in section 3.4; namely, that some online communities and/or spaces seem to be particularly fruitful sites for the resistance and subversion of cultural norms, but that online spaces are nevertheless varied and diverse, and therefore also likely to engender dominant norms and stereotypes. This new research question invites an exploration of whether Mumsnet Talk offers particular resources their either facilitate, constrain, or both facilitate *and* constrain, users' negotiation of discourses and access to a range of subject positions.

4.4.4. Analysing discourses at play in interaction

Having more confidently identified some of the discourses at play in each thread, at this final step I conduct in-depth microlinguistic analyses that focus exclusively on the way those discourses operate. I therefore turn my attention to the research questions that now read 'How do Mumsnet users position themselves, and how are they positioned, in relation to these discourses?' and 'Does Mumsnet Talk offer particular resources that facilitate and/or constrain Mumsnet users' opportunities to challenge, resist or negotiate dominant discourses, and open up new ways of being?'

For the purpose of these analyses, I identify an interactional sequence from each thread that is of particular interest. My first criterion for identifying these sequences is that there must be some evidence of an interplay between participants – they should respond to one another through direct address, by answering each other's questions, or by picking up on themes others have introduced. This does not mean that posts have to occur in numerical sequence, one immediately after the other. Because Mumsnet Talk is an asynchronous forum (meaning that there tends to be a delay between the production and reception of messages) and is open to a large group of members, posts to threads often do not relate to one another in direct chronological sequence, as they may in other asynchronous contexts such as emails to a single addressee. Rather, Mumsnet users will often respond to the original post, taking little account of others' contributions, or respond directly to a contribution that appeared, chronologically, several posts earlier (see section 6.1.1).

The second criterion differs for each thread. From 'Your identity as a mother', I identify a moment of discursive struggle (Baxter, 2003): a site of contested knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 5.3 for further discussion). In the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread, however, I suggest that no single sequence stands out as being more discursively 'significant' than others, and thus choose a sequence that I judge to be representative of the thread as a whole. I make this decision because, unlike 'Your identity as a mother', in 'Can we have a child exchange?', posts are far more uniform in

style and consistent in the way their authors draw on, and position themselves in relation to, a group of discourses (see section 6.3 for further discussion). The sequence I choose from 'Can we have a child exchange?' is judged to be representative because those who contribute to it all draw on both the linguistic conventions of classified advertisements, and the indices of gender and class, that pervade the thread as a whole. The results of these analyses are explored in sections 5.3 and 6.3. I continue to draw on the work of key authors, namely Baxter (2014), Davies and Harré (1990), Du Bois (2007), Goffman (1974) and Ochs (1992) at this final analytical step.

4.5. Research questions

I conceptualise my research questions, like my findings, as a product of the research process itself. As a result, they have been amended and refined in response to my developing understanding of the theoretical framework that underpins this thesis (see chapter 2), literature from relevant fields (see chapter 3) and my engagement with, and understanding of, the Mumsnet Talk forum itself, especially the threads selected for further analysis (this chapter). I have already detailed and justified some of the changes made from my original set of research questions in sections 4.3.5, 4.4 and 4.4.4. Here, I highlight and explain some final adjustments, before introducing the final set of research questions that provide a unifying structure and focus for the rest of this thesis.

I will explain these final adjustments in relation to the four research questions that have been introduced and explained up to this point:

1. Is parenting gendered in Mumsnet interactions? If so, how and why?
2. What discourses are at play in Mumsnet interactions?
   2a. What methods are best suited to the identification of discourses in Mumsnet Talk?
3. How do Mumsnet users position themselves, and how are they positioned, in relation to these discourses?
4. Does Mumsnet Talk offer particular resources that facilitate and/or constrain Mumsnet users' opportunities to challenge, resist or negotiate dominant discourses, and open up new ways of being?

Research question 1 is based on the central aim to explore what contribution, if any, gender makes to the way Mumsnet users see themselves and their interactions with others (see section 1.1). The final version of this question reads 'Are Mumsnet users positioned as gendered parental subjects? If so, how?' This amended question now indicates how the gendering of parenthood will be explored – namely, through a focus on subjectivity, and in particular, how individuals may be subject positioned *by* discursive forces (see section 1.3.1). This reformulated question draws in an element from research question 3, because it prompts consideration of how Mumsnet users are positioned in

relation to discourses of gender differentiation (see section 1.3.2). Subsequent changes to research question 3 are explored below.

I make a slight change to research question 2 at this point by asking 'what discourses are at play, *and how are they significant*, in Mumsnet interactions?' This question now prompts me to explain and explore the particular relevance of any discourses I highlight, both for this thesis, and for Mumsnet users themselves, adding a critical element to an otherwise rather prosaic question. I also make changes to research question 2a, so that it now reads 'what methods *are effective for* the identification *and analysis* of discourses in Mumsnet Talk?' The first change moves away from comparison: to know which methods were 'best suited', I would have to sample a wide range of methods, compare my findings and attempt to judge which yielded the 'best' results, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. I would also have to determine that one set of methods were definitively better than others, which would contradict the open, flexible and pragmatic principles that underpin this study. Secondly, by asking what methods are effective for the identification *and analysis* of discourses in Mumsnet Talk, I make this question more appropriate for a study that treats discourses as both the object and result of analysis: that analyses and identifies discourses as part of an iterative process (see section 4.4). I also broaden the scope of this question, so that it is now more appropriately positioned as a separate question in its own right, rather than a subsidiary of research question 2. This final change also foregrounds my growing realisation that the development of an effective approach to identifying and analysing discourses is an important part of this thesis, and an important part of the overall contribution it makes to the sociolinguistic discipline.

Research questions 3 and 4 are combined at this point. I have already shown above that part of research question 3 is now addressed by the question 'Are Mumsnet users positioned as gendered parental subjects? If so, how?' The question of how Mumsnet users position *themselves* in relation to discourses can now be usefully combined with the question of what particular resources Mumsnet Talk offers its users in this process of discursive self-positioning. The new question that results from this combination is 'How do Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to discourses, and does Mumsnet Talk offer particular resources that facilitate or constrain its users' opportunities to construct transformative discursive positions?' I have simplified the final part of this question: my focus on Mumsnet users' 'opportunities to construct transformative discursive positions' now has a clearer link to my central aim of exploring the ways of being available to Mumsnet users.

My final set of research questions now read thus:

1. What discourses are at play, and how are they significant, in Mumsnet interactions?
2. Are Mumsnet users positioned as gendered parental subjects? If so, how?
3. How do Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to discourses, and does Mumsnet Talk offer particular resources that facilitate or constrain its users' opportunities to construct transformative discursive positions?
4. What methods are effective for the identification and analysis of discourses in Mumsnet Talk?

4.6. Ethical considerations

There are a number of core ethical principles that recur time and again in institutional guidelines (e.g. BAAL, 2006; ESRC, 2016; Markham, Buchanan, and The AoIR, 2012), including the guidelines offered by the School of Languages and Social Sciences (LSS) at Aston University, where I am based (LSS Ethics Committee, 2011). These principles also pervade much recent literature that explores the ethics of internet research (e.g. Markham and Buchanan, 2015; Page, Barton, Unger and Zappavigna, 2014; Rosenberg, 2010). The following list summarises these ethical principles, which have served as a guide to ethical conduct throughout the design and development of this study:

1. Respect research participants' right to privacy, confidentiality and autonomy;
2. Avoid harm and maximise benefits for research participants;
3. Treat research participants fairly and equally.

These principles, alongside self-reflexive engagement with the particular conditions of this study, have been central to the design and implementation of a study that is ethically sound, as well as being viable and realistic. They can be further distilled to the maxim *do no harm,* which has been emphasised as a fundamental ethical principle in much up-to-date thinking on the subject of ethics, privacy and internet research (e.g. Markham et al., 2012; Markham and Buchanan, 2015). 'Harm' is defined here in a very broad sense. There is little possibility for physical harm to be caused during the process of my study, but the potential for emotional or psychological harm does need to be considered carefully.

At the start of my research, my consideration of ethical issues was significantly influenced by my perception of Mumsnet Talk as a 'public' forum. Many internet researchers have defined 'public' online contexts as those that are freely available to anyone (e.g. Androutsopoulos, 2008; Sveningsson Elm, 2009; Thelwall and Wilkinson, 2010). The Mumsnet Talk forum meets this criterion; anyone with an internet connection can access its content. Additionally, Talk threads often appear in internet search results, so can easily be found by internet users who might not otherwise take an interest in the forum. Mumsnet users are reminded of this fact when they enter the Talk forum, where the words 'please be aware this is a public forum and your postings are open for all to see' are clearly displayed (see Figure 4.7). Many internet researchers agree that where data are

sourced from 'public' contexts like this, consent from participants is probably not necessary (see Androutsopoulos, 2008; Sveningsson Elm, 2009; Thelwall and Wilkinson, 2010). This is based on the assumption that users of 'public' spaces have waived any rights to privacy, confidentiality and autonomy, and thus that it is not unfair or harmful to access and use this information for research purposes. My first research ethics approval form, approved by the ethics committee at my institution in May 2014, reflects this assumption, and clearly states that 'informed consent will not be sought from participants before data are collected or analysed because the Talk forum is so explicitly public' (see Appendix H).

Figure 4.7. Screen shot from www.mumsnet.com/talk, accessed 29.01.2014.

Aston University

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However, approaches to internet research ethics have recently seen a shift, from a preoccupation with whether research sites can be defined as public or private, towards a case-based, context-sensitive approach (see Markham and Buchanan 2012, 2015). This shift goes hand-in-hand with intense academic interest and discussion around the meaning and relevance of the public/private dichotomy itself, particularly in relation to rapidly evolving and shifting online contexts. My engagement with debates and the growing body of literature on the subject of internet research ethics, together with my developing understanding of the Mumsnet Talk forum from the perspective of an observer-participant (see section 4.3.1), has also led to a shift in my own approach to ethics in this study.

As explained in section 4.3.1, in the early stages of my research, I did not feel able to position myself as a participant within the Mumsnet Talk forum. However, when I began to acknowledge my engagement with the site and to situate myself within it, I became better able to understand my research context as a participant, even though I remained a 'silent' user (see section 4.3.1). As a result, I began to recognise certain norms of interaction and information sharing within this online space (see Mackenzie, forthcoming). For example, many contributors often seemed to address quite a specific audience that I felt did not include me (as a researcher); I felt that most would not expect a researcher to take an interest in their contributions to a busy forum. In addition, it became clear to

me that a lot of Mumsnet users value their sense of privacy and anonymity very highly, with many exercising their autonomy and agency in imaginative ways to control and shape the accessibility of their posts and the degree to which they are identifiable as single users. As an observer-participant, I was able to recognise the potential for my research to cause harm through violation of such norms and to re-evaluate my ethical choices accordingly. One of the most significant changes I made as a result of these considerations was to contact all of the Mumsnet users whose words I wished to quote, and/or analyse in detail, and ask for their informed consent. By seeking consent, I gave potential participants the power to decide for themselves whether or not they were happy for their posts to be used for research purposes. Subsequent amendments to my research ethics approval form reflect this shift in my approach and the steps I took to protect my research participants. For example, I state in my second version of this form (see Appendix I) that 'Although the Mumsnet Talk forum is explicitly public, I believe that there is uncertainty regarding what *users* perceive to be 'public', and how they anticipate their interactions will be used. I therefore… seek informed consent from participants whose contributions will be analysed in detail, and potentially quoted in publications or presentations'. These amendments were also approved by the ethics committee at Aston University.

I initially contacted Mumsnet users via the site's private messaging system, a method chosen in collaboration with Mumsnet staff. The messages I sent to potential participants (see Appendix J) were brief and to the point, so as not to inconvenience participants too much, or risk losing their interest. These messages include a link to my online consent form (see Appendix K) and also to a page within my personal blog, where I provide additional information about myself and my study (see Appendix L). I also observe good practice guidelines by including the objectives of my research and issues relating to confidentiality and data security within this page (see BAAL, 2006: 4). Choosing the right words for my message has required careful thought and continuous adjustment in response to the concerns and opinions of my participants. My final adjustment (Appendix J3) includes an offer to send the thread, or individual contributions, before asking potential participants to make a decision regarding their consent. In addition, I make it very clear in this message that silence will *not* be interpreted as consent; in other words, contributors who did not respond were not included in the study. Samples of consent from participants included in this study can be found in Appendix K.

My message also gives contributors the option to have their usernames anonymised. Several participants have chosen this option, despite already using pseudonyms, and have subsequently been given new names that retain the spirit of their original username. The fact that many participants made this choice shows that 'anonymity' is a complex matter of protecting individuals'

sense of privacy and dignity, and respecting the steps they have taken to control which selves they present to the world. However, guaranteeing anonymity is unfortunately not a straightforward process when data are collected online because quotes can often be traced back to the original source through a web search (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Ess, 2007). The double measure of paraphrasing or altering quotes can provide absolute anonymity (Ess, 2007), but this option is not favourable in the context of sociolinguistic research such as this, where the most subtle linguistic choices may be of significant interest. The fact that I select threads only from the 'chat' section of Mumsnet Talk circumvents these issues to a large extent. Posts to this section are only kept on the site for a period of 90 days from the first post. As long as the data are shared more than 90 days from the date of first posting, quotes will therefore not be 'searchable' online, offering an additional safeguard. Although anonymity can never be absolutely guaranteed, it is therefore very likely that where participants wish to remain anonymous, they will be.

Communicating via private message has been a very effective way of reaching out to Mumsnet users, who, by and large, have been quick to respond. There have also been other, unanticipated benefits of contacting participants in this way. For example, some have been keen to engage in conversation about my research. These informal discussions have provided invaluable insights into my participants' opinions and feelings about Mumsnet Talk, and about their interactions being used in a research study. These insights have informed my developing understanding of the interactional norms within this forum. They have also given participants an opportunity to voice any concerns and ask questions; to have some sense that they are involved in the research process, as participants rather than passive research 'subjects'.

Potential participants' responses to my request, however, have varied. Some have consented enthusiastically, whilst others have emphatically refused, often offering no explanation for this refusal. Those who explicitly withheld their consent, or did not respond, have not been included in this study. Their posts and usernames are removed from threads at an early stage, and replaced with the phrase 'post omitted', in order to retain a sense of the original sequence of posts (see Appendices D and E). Additionally, any reference made to these users by other participants is removed. Because Mumsnet threads do not tend to unfold in chronological sequence and participants often do not respond directly to one another, these omissions are considered to be reasonable adjustments. Both threads remain coherent overall and several interactional sequences can still be identified, as the analyses of sections 5.3 and 6.3 will show. Details of how many contributors to each thread responded, consented and chose to have their usernames anonymised, are provided in table 4.2.

Table 4.2. Contributors' responses to my request for consent

Thread title	Your identity as a mother	Can we have a child exchange?
Total contributors	70	63
Could not be contacted	6	1
Consented	51	35
Wished to be anonymous	11	8
Did not consent	5	3
Did not respond	10	24

The final step I take to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality is to store all data electronically and securely on a password protected computer and USB drive. This is an important step because the initial corpus of 50 threads collected during the data construction process has not been anonymised, and most contributors to these threads have not given consent for them to be used for research purposes.

It is not only the choice of data, but the way data are analysed, of course, that may cause potential harm to research subjects. I therefore aim to respect my research subjects' rights, be attentive to their well-being and remain aware of my responsibility to represent them fairly throughout the analytical process. My self-reflexive approach and my positioning as an observer-participant (see section 4.3.1) support these aims.

4.7. Self-reflections

I make it clear from the start of this chapter that my research design is inductive and recursive. However, the requirements of a PhD thesis are such that, in the process of communicating my methodology in an acceptable and coherent way, it is fixed in a linear format and many of the subtleties of the research process are lost. However, I do make some structural choices in a bid to recognise the complexities and shifts involved in the research process. For example, many insights related to my overall methodological approach emerge quite late in this study, through ongoing reflection both during and after analysis. Rather than introducing these insights at the start of this chapter, which would create the impression that my approach is a pre-established framework, they are introduced in the discussion chapter (see section 7.5). My research questions have also developed through this emergent research process. As a result, I have devoted space in this chapter to the discussion of these emerging research questions, and delay the presentation of my final set of research questions until section 4.5. In this section, I take the opportunity to describe some of the

'hidden' complexities of my research design, and to acknowledge some pivotal moments in the development of this study as a whole.

In section 4.4, I detail some of the analytical frameworks, concepts and methods that I draw on through the second stage of this study. This is necessarily a very selective outline. Throughout this study, I have consulted a wide range of sources that have influenced the development of an analytical approach that is well suited to my research aims and context. For example, Bucholtz and Hall's (2005: 605) 'tactics of intersubjectivity' have been useful in my early conceptualisation of Mumsnet users' positioning of self in relation to others. In my early analysis of a 'significant moment' of interaction in 'Your identity as a mother' (see section 5.3), for example, I initially describe participants' foregrounding of similarities and downplaying of differences between groups using Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) terms 'adequation' and 'distinction', respectively. Further, Tajfel and Turner's (Tajfel and Turner, 1979) theory of intergroup conflict initially supports my understanding of the power struggles and status claims that are played out in Mumsnet users' interactions. However, as my analysis develops, other concepts and frameworks become more central (such as Baxter, 2014; Davies and Harré, 1990; Du Bois, 2007). As a result, my description and conceptualisation of the way Mumsnet users discursively position themselves through interaction gains clarity and force, but some of the subtleties of the research process, including a sense of how I arrive at these analytical descriptions, has been lost.

I turn now to the relevance of my role as a mother in the research process, considering, in particular, how it affects my positioning in relation to Mumsnet users and the interactions they produce. Throughout the process of data construction and analysis, I emphasise the similarities between myself and my research subjects, as others such as Lawler (2000) and Gillies (2007) have done in their interactions with, and subsequent writing about, mothers. My observations lead me to recognise, for example, that most of my research subjects, like me, are mothers, and often mothers of quite young children. I, like they, enjoy communicating through digital media, and am generally able to share my thoughts articulately in writing. We also share an interest in discussing and sharing experiences of parenting and working to improve our own and our children's lives. It has been a relatively common experience during my observations to read a post that expresses almost precisely my own thoughts on a subject, or which is written by an individual whose background appears to be very similar to my own. Of course, a diverse range of voices can be found within Mumsnet Talk, so I have also found it difficult to connect with some posts on a personal level. In either case, connecting with my own personal responses to threads and individual posts leads me to position myself *within* the Mumsnet Talk forum; to put myself in contributors' shoes and consider that every Mumsnet user

who posts to the forum could be me, and also to engage with threads from a range of perspectives. In this way I position myself as an equal member of Mumsnet, who is likely to share much in common with other users, as well as unequal 'researcher' to my 'subjects' (see section 4.3.1). My engagement with the threads in several different ways, for example through the process of observation, sampling and coding, supports this reflexive self-positioning. At the same time, my enduring role as a researcher compels me to also distance myself from my own opinions and attitudes, or at least try to scrutinise them with the same criticality that is applied to my analysis of others' interactions.

The fact that a number of different views, values and experiences are often expressed within a single Mumsnet thread facilitates my attempt to read and analyse from multiple perspectives, and to recognise and interrogate my own response as just one of many. For example, my personal reaction when I start reading a thread is often challenged as I continue to read, so that by the time I reach the end, I have reconsidered my initial response. Indeed, the whole process of conducting this study has led me to question, re-consider and re-position myself time and time again. Thus, my beliefs, attitudes and values are not just aspects I bring *to* my study, but aspects that evolve as my research progresses (see section 5.4).

4.8. Summary and conclusion

The main aim of this chapter is to outline my research design. I have achieved this aim by first situating this study in a qualitative tradition, and also making links with my theoretical framework. I devote a good deal of attention to the dual influence of ethnography and grounded theory, particularly the key principles of flexibility, self-reflexivity and emergent theory, which remain central through both the first and second stages of my study. The rest of this chapter details, step-by-step, the various concepts and methods that are employed in this study and justifies their relevance in relation to my research aims. However, I do not yet offer an overall summary of my particular approach, or consider in any detail how effective this approach is for the identification and analysis of discourses (see my final research question, section 4.5). As explained in section 4.7, I delay this explication of my approach until section 7.5, *after* the two analysis chapters that follow, so that the nature and effectiveness of this approach can be appreciated in relation to the analyses through which it emerged.

The chapters that follow present the results of the analytical processes described in this chapter. My analysis of the first thread selected for in-depth qualitative analysis, 'Your identity as a mother', is detailed in chapter 5, whilst chapter 6 presents findings from my analysis of the second thread, 'Can we have a child exchange?'

Chapter 5. Analysing the 'Your identity as a mother' thread

5.1. Introduction

This is the first of two chapters relating to the second stage of my research design, identifying and analysing discourses (see sections 4.1. and 4.4). In this chapter, I focus in on a single thread from the Mumsnet Talk forum, titled 'Your identity as a mother'. My investigation of this thread can be divided in to several steps, which are outlined in figure 5.1, below.

Figure 5.1. Stage 2 of my research design
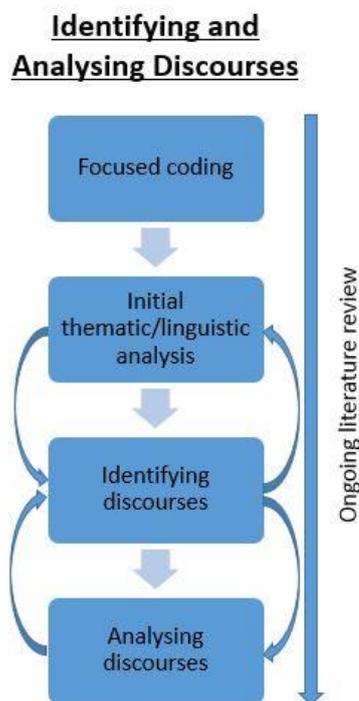
In this section, I outline my aims for the chapter and introduce the 'Your identity as a mother' thread. The key 'theoretical' nodes (see section 4.4.1), references or *absence* of reference that emerge from my coding and initial analysis of this thread are explored in sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2, leading to theorisation about the potential discourses at work in this thread. In section 5.2.3, I show how I explore and test some of the theories developed from my coding and initial analysis, through further microlinguistic analysis that focuses on the intersections between potential discourses and the central nexus of discourse theory: knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 2.4.1). I conclude section 5.2 by outlining six discourses at work in 'Your identity as a mother', and identifying some of the key linguistic features through which these discourses are realised (section 5.2.4).

In section 5.3, I detail my analysis of an interactional sequence that is of particular discursive interest: a 'significant moment' in the thread at which discursive forces seem to be at play (see

section 4.4.4). The ways in which Mumsnet users are positioned, and position themselves, in relation to discourses becomes the main focus at this point. The work of Davies and Harré (1990) and Du Bois (2007) supports this analytical focus (see section 4.4.3).

My overall aims for the analysis outlined in this chapter, in line with my research questions (see section 4.5), are to:

- identify the discourses at play in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread and consider how they are significant (section 5.2);
- investigate the way Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to these discourses (section 5.2 and 5.3);
- consider whether Mumsnet Talk offers resources that facilitate or constrain its users' opportunities to construct transformative discursive positions (sections 5.2 and 5.3);
- explore whether, and how, Mumsnet users are positioned as gendered parental subjects in these digital interactions (section 5.2 and 5.3), and
- develop methods that are effective for the identification and analysis of discourses in Mumsnet Talk (section 5.2).

5.1.1. Introducing the thread

As explained in section 4.3.6, I identify 'Your identity as a mother' for close, qualitative analysis because it seems to be a thread in which multiple relations between 'gender' and 'parenthood' are explored and negotiated. I also note that this is a thread in which participants quite explicitly address the topic of interest for this thesis through metacommentary. The title and opening post of 'Your identity as a mother' (extract 5.1) sets out the original poster's agenda: to explore 'people's experiences' of motherhood; in particular, how motherhood 'changes' them, and 'their view of themselves'.

Extract 5.1. Title and opening post - 'Your identity as a mother'

Your identity as a mother

Aston University
Illustration removed for copyright restrictions

1. I've been reading a lot of fiction that deals with motherhood and family relationships
2. and I'm curious as to how it changes people, and their view of themselves. Has your
3. perception of who you are changed since you had children? How much of your identity
4. is bound up with being a mum? Do you think the strength of your desire to be a
5. mum/what stage in your life you had them affected the degree of the changes?

6. For some reason this has come out reading like an exam question - it's not meant to
7. be! Just curious about people's experiences.

What first interested me about this thread, especially from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, was the way that multiple voices and outlooks seemed to interact as participants openly discussed

and negotiated their sense of self, particularly in relation to the category 'mum'. An excerpt from the memo I wrote after first reading the thread reveals my initial interpretation of some of these perspectives (extract 5.2; this memo is reproduced in full in Appendix N).

Extract 5.2. Excerpt from reading 1 memo - 'Your identity as a mother'.

```
A few posters to this thread rejected the gendered term 'mother' in favour of
'parent'… This rejection of gendered 'mum' was, however, uncommon. A large number
said they felt 'defined' by motherhood, though whether they felt this was a
positive thing varied. Some completely embraced and revelled in having a 'mum'
identity, some said it made them a better person; others talked about having a
sense of 'losing' themselves - one even admitted to having had suicidal thoughts.
```

In section 5.3, I focus in on a sequence of five posts from this thread, in which participants address the overall theme – your identity as a mother – with an emphasis on how parental identities can be defined by particular outlooks or philosophies of parenting, namely, 'attachment parenting'. Although the posts that make up this sequence do not appear in numerical order, I describe them as a sequence because they form part of an interaction in which four contributors respond to each other. As noted in section 4.4.4, the nature of the Mumsnet discussion forum is such that posts do not always relate to each other in direct chronological sequence, but interactions can nevertheless take place across posts that are distant in time and space.

Some of the abbreviations commonly found in Mumsnet Talk can make posts difficult for the uninitiated to interpret. The Mumsnet site itself includes a page that glosses common acronyms and abbreviations (see http://www.mumsnet.com/info/acronyms). An abridged version of this list is provided at the start of this thesis, which includes only the abbreviations that feature in the two threads selected for close analysis in this thesis. Within this chapter, they are also glossed in square brackets after first use. Usernames are also often abbreviated in Mumsnet Talk. My abbreviation of particularly long names, both in this chapter and in chapter 6, is therefore consistent with the practices of Mumsnet users themselves.

5.2. Coding, initial analysis and identifying discourses

My analysis of 'Your identity as a mother' begins with focused and theoretical coding (see section 4.4.1). This process leads me to identify five theoretical nodes for further exploration:

- 'total' motherhood;
- child-centricity;
- individuality;
- references to men, and
- equality between parents.

(see Appendix F1 for a list of all nodes created at this stage)

As noted in section 4.4.1, some of these nodes stand out because they contain a particularly high number of aggregated references – namely, the first three nodes listed above. The other two contain relatively few references, but all are identified as theoretically and analytically significant. Once I have identified these nodes, I explore them further by tracking their references through the thread, with a particular focus on language (see section 4.4.2). As my analysis develops, I gather further evidence that leads me to describe some formations as potential discourses. I focus increasingly on intersections between potential discourses and the central 'nexus' of discourse theory: knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 2.4.1); that is, whether, and how, potential discourses constitute forms of knowledge, position subjects in particular roles and inscribe power relations. Between sections 5.2.1 to 5.2.3, I use samples from my extensive qualitative analysis of the thread to support my arguments and analyses. Where relevant, I provide further analysis, evidence and examples in supporting Appendices (O-T). These analyses ultimately lead me to more confidently identify several discourses, which are outlined in section 5.2.4.

5.2.1. Exploring 'total motherhood', 'child-centricity' and 'individuality'

'Total' motherhood

The theoretical node 'total motherhood' (see Appendix F2) includes references in which participants convey a sense that 'motherhood' has a significant effect upon their lives and the ways in which they position themselves. It includes the following sub-categories:

- being a mum;
- being an 'attachment parent';
- 'I don't know who I am';
- inevitability of motherhood, and
- mother as 'whole woman'.

The total motherhood node includes themes that are prominent across my corpus of 50 threads (see section 4.3). For example, similarities can be identified between the sub-categories listed above and the following nodes from the first (data construction) stage of the research process:

- being 'consumed' by motherhood';
- 'I don't really go out any more';
- 'your only purpose as a woman is to give birth';
- being a 'good mum', and
- mother as main parent.

The pervasiveness and sheer number of expressions of 'total motherhood', both within 'Your identity as a mother' and across my corpus of threads, suggests that it is not just a theme, but a more pervasive and powerful structure. Many of the sub-categories listed here foreground the way

individuals are positioned as subjects, as apparent through the frequency of the pronouns 'I' and 'your', the relational verbs 'being' and 'am' and the categories 'mum' or 'mother'. This suggests that references within these nodes may contain traces of structures that work to position subjects: of potential *discourses.* So, too, does the fact that a number of sub-categories within 'total motherhood' have competing counterparts within this thread. For example, 'being a mum' can be said to compete with the nodes 'being me', 'being a parent' and 'being a worker, having a job or career' (see Appendix F1). The presence of these competing subject positions suggests that contributors to 'Your identity as a mother' may engage in discursive struggles to define their subjectivity.

The sub-category 'being a mum' contains the largest number of references within the 'total motherhood' category. This node contains multiple references in which participants self-identify as a 'mum'[1]. For example:

Post 4. I've been a mother for so long
Post 12. I'm a mum to 2 under5s (*sic*)
Post 72. I am 'mum' a lot of the time
Post 84. I'm a mother of 2

In each of these examples, the personal pronoun 'I' takes the subject position in the sentence, with the category 'mum' or 'mother' taking the object position, so that 'I' and 'mother' are equated directly. The subject position 'mum', indeed, is pervasive throughout the thread. Even at moments where participants use strategies to avoid it, many continue to position themselves as 'mums' or 'mothers', suggesting that it is difficult for them to resist or adopt an alternative subject position (further analysis of the 'individuality' node, below and in section 5.2.3., supports this claim). Participants' persistent categorisation of themselves as 'mums' in this thread points to the presence of a discursive force that fixes parents in distinct and binary subject positions along gendered lines, as 'mothers' and 'fathers': a potential discourse of 'gendered parenthood'.

Further, where participants qualify 'mum' with an intensifier, as in the following examples from the 'total motherhood' node (intensifiers marked in **bold**), they suggest that this subject position has a 'total' influence over their sense of self:

Post 3. I think I am almost **entirely** Mum.
Post 11. As soon as I became a mum, I was **100%** mum and loved it…
Post 16. I am almost **wholly** Mum,
Post 18. I have been **so intensely** mum for the last 10 months

---

[1] Identifying as a 'mum' is very common across my larger data set of 50 threads; the node 'identifying as a mum' (see appendix C2) contains the largest number of references in the 'constructing identities' category.

Although further analysis in this section and in section 5.2.3 will show that some participants resist being positioned as 'total mothers', others seem to take up this subject position with enthusiasm, as can be seen in post 75 (extract 5.3).

Extract 5.3. post 75

1. Being a mother was all I ever wanted to be. I felt like a shadow of a person before.
2. Raising my children is by far the most important thing in my life. There are lots of
3. hobbies and activities I want to do, but I have chosen to put them off until my
4. children are a lot older and need me less. I know for some people that would be a
5. dreadful thought, but I'm doing exactly what I want and am incredibly fulfilled by it.

In this post, ███████ (the author) positions herself as a subject of the potential discourse of 'gendered parenthood'. Her use of the relational process 'being a mother' in line 1 frames her entire post in terms of this relation. Nonie's statement 'Being a mother was all I ever wanted to be', further, is suggestive of an absolute investment in motherhood. Her use of the present participle 'being', together with the intensifying qualifiers 'all' and 'ever' suggests that her self-positioning in relation to motherhood is ongoing; that she always has, and always will, position herself in relation to motherhood.

Nonie's juxtaposition of her past (line 1) and present feelings (line 2, line 5) further emphasises her sense of fulfilment. The time preposition 'before' (line 1) draws attention to this comparison. Her statement 'I felt like a shadow of a person before' (line 1) points to a void; the paradoxical metaphor of a self that exists only as a shadow suggests an absence of 'selfhood' or being. By contrast, her use of the phrases 'exactly what I want' and 'incredibly fulfilled' (line 5) in relation to the present imply control and a feeling of wholeness. The verb 'fulfilled' contrasts with the 'shadow' metaphor in its implication of solidity and form. The implication is that without the 'mother' role, Nonie lacks solid human form; she is not a whole 'person'. The implied exclusivity of this self-positioning as a 'mother', illustrated through my analysis of Nonie's post and the excerpts listed above, points to the presence of an additional discursive force that not only constitutes parental subject positions along gendered lines, but fixes female subjects in a parental role to the exclusion of all other subject positions: a potential discourse of 'total motherhood' (see Appendix O for further analysis of Nonie's post in support of this claim).

The two potential discourses identified here are not entirely separate. The potential discourse 'total motherhood' can in fact be subsumed within 'gendered parenthood', since it relies first on the fixing of parental subjectivity along gendered lines. However, the distinction between the two lies in

the way that 'total motherhood' positions individuals as 'mothers' to the exclusion of all other potential subject positions.

Child-centricity

The theoretical node 'child-centricity' (see Appendix F3) combines references in which participants express their positive feelings for and commitment to their children. It includes the following sub-categories:

- being 'needed' by children;
- expressing love for children;
- 'I don't matter';
- positivity towards children;
- pride in children, and
- putting children first.

Again, similarities can be identified between these sub-categories and the following nodes identified through the coding of my whole corpus during the process of data construction (see section 4.3):

- being positive about, supportive and proud of your children;
- 'I love my children';
- putting children's needs first, and
- looking after, caring for and protecting children.

This juxtaposition makes it apparent that expressions of 'child-centricity', like 'total motherhood', are pervasive and multiple not just within 'Your identity as a mother' but across my whole corpus of 50 threads. As with 'total motherhood', several sub-categories of 'child-centricity' can also be paired with 'competing' counterparts. For example, many references within the nodes 'fake it till you make it' and 'cut yourself some slack' (see Appendix F1) contrast with the expressions of love and selflessness within the above nodes 'expressing love for children' and 'putting children first'. These competing expressions again point to a struggle to define forms of knowledge and subjectivity surrounding children and Mumsnet users' relations to them. At this point I therefore suggest that 'child-centricity' is also a potential discourse.

Microlinguistic analysis of references within the child-centricity node suggests, further, that this potential discourse acquires 'commonsense legitimacy' (Ellece, 2012; see section 2.4.1) in the thread; that it is generally taken for granted that participants love their children, care for them and put them first. This commonsense legitimacy is expressed, for example, in the following excerpts, where participants' positive feelings towards their children and willingness to put them first are presented as certain and unmitigated:

Post 18. My priority is now 100% my DS [darling son] though
Post 21. I love my DC [darling children]. 🙂
Post 34. even though I love the DC to death

The smiley 🙂 in post 21 indicates a certainty that this statement of love will be well received. This contributor's declaration of love for her children is particularly striking as the monosyllabic sentence 'I love my DC' is positioned in a separate, one-line paragraph at the end of her post, distinguishing it from the rest of her post and drawing attention to the central importance of the theme of absolute, unconditional love. All of the above examples, in fact, are taken from the final line of posts, adding to the force and finality of these statements. These contributors' approval of the potential discourse of child-centricity is the lasting impression they leave with their readers.

The presence and commonsense legitimacy of a potential discourse of child-centricity can also be evidenced through implications that child-centred behaviour is involuntary and instinctive, or 'natural', as in post 23 (extract 5.4).

Extract 5.4. post 23

██████████

1. It was DS's birthday yesterday, so I was taking stock of life. I always do when that
2. date comes around!

3. I am still very bound up in being a mum although that role is now more about
4. promoting self reliance and supporting his independent skills. There is now a greater
5. balance of give and are (*sic*) between DS and I, I enjoy his company and we do things
6. together that we love. However, I am still astonished at times that I give up so much
7. time to encourage his interests (hours at the edge of a rugby pitch, early mornings at
8. a swimming pool) and I can only assume that this is pure maternal love!

In this post, ████████ (the author) positions her son at the centre of her life (see Appendix P for further analysis and evidence in support of this claim). Between lines 6 and 8, she makes it explicit that she puts her son's needs before her own, for example through her use of the verbal phrase 'give up' in line 6, which implies that she is not only passing time, but that this is a selfless act; that she is losing something in 'giving' her time. ████████ (The author) also suggests that she goes to extreme lengths in her commitment to her son, using the intensifying qualifiers 'so much' and the potentially limitless descriptor 'hours' (line 7) and 'early mornings' (line 7) to emphasise the amount of time she has given to him and the extreme nature of her commitment. The adverbs 'always' (line 1) and 'still' (line 6) suggest that her commitment to her son is ongoing.

████████ (The author's) post also suggests that this child-centred behaviour is involuntary and instinctive. For example, from lines 6 to 8, she expresses surprise at, and lack of understanding of, her own action of 'giv[ing] up so much time' to encourage her son's interests when she qualifies

this process with the subordinate clause 'I am still astonished at times' (line 6). ████████ (The author) later attributes her behaviour to 'pure maternal love' (line 8, my emphasis), a justification that implies her actions are instinctive and 'natural'. She again mitigates her explanation with a subordinate clause: 'I can only assume' (line 8).

The adverb 'only' here suggests that 'assumptions' are all she can make, in the absence of any rational explanation. Queen's linguistic choices work to imply that 'child-centred' behaviour is automatic or instinctive; that it cannot be explained by rational thought. Thus, they point to the commonsense legitimacy of 'child-centricity', a potential discourse that constitutes knowledge about children and fixes subjects in particular relations to them: as loving, committed parents. There are, however, moments in the thread at which this legitimacy is challenged, as will be illustrated through the analysis of section 5.2.3.

Individuality

The theoretical node 'individuality' (see Appendix F4) combines references in which participants seek to emphasise their individuality, choice and control. It includes the sub-categories:

- being 'me';
- choice and control, and
- highlighting hobbies, interests, individuality.

As with 'total motherhood' and 'child-centricity', there are a range of expressions of the 'individuality' theme across my corpus of threads as a whole. The theme of 'individuality' is also expressed, for example, in the following nodes from the data construction stage (see section 4.3):

- looking after my needs;
- making time for interests that are 'just about me';
- 'I'm not just a mother', and
- 'rediscovering myself'.

As noted above, the competing relation between some nodes, such as the 'total motherhood' node 'being a mum' and the 'individuality' node 'being me', point to a discursive struggle to define competing subject positions and forms of knowledge. I am therefore encouraged, again, to identify this theoretical node as a *potential discourse.* The following excerpts from the 'being me' node show that, just as the potential discourses of 'gendered parenthood' and 'total motherhood' are realised most persistently through participants' self-identification as 'mums', a potential discourse of 'individuality' is repeatedly made apparent through participants' self-identification as 'individuals':

Post 12. I am me as I have always been
Post 14. I am me.
Post 44. I am who I am.
Post 72. I am totally me.. the same me as before..

Each of these statements contains a variant of the clause 'I am me', in which a personal pronoun takes both subject and object position in the clause. It is through this double reference to the self that participants make their claim to individuality. These claims are made particularly emphatic in posts 14, 44 and 72, where the clause stands as a complete sentence, and in post 72, where the participant uses the intensifier 'totally' to make explicit her claim that she is 'completely' herself, in the same way that the author of post 11 claims that she is (or rather *was*) '100% mum'.

Further microlinguistic analysis supports my claim that the potential discourses of 'individuality' and 'total motherhood' often compete in this thread. For example, in post 13 (extract 5.5), Crazym positions herself as an 'individual' largely through emphatic resistance to being categorised as 'mum'.

Extract 5.5. post 13

██████████

1. Hate being identified as " mum" (*sic*).
2. I was a person before I became a mum and that person still exists.being (*sic*) a mum is
3. 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 Dcs would say
5. " and (*sic*) how are you today, mum?"
6. I have a name!!!! I am a person!!

By opening her post with the negative evaluation 'hate', ████████(the author) resists being subject positioned exclusively as 'mum' in favour of a more individualistic subject position; the 'I' introduced in line 2. Her use of the label 'person' in reference to herself, repeated both in lines 2 and 6, and made emphatic by the lack of mitigation and excessive use of exclamation marks, also reinforces her preference for this self-positioning as an individual, not a 'mum'. The opening and closing statements of her post capture her emphatic resistance by presenting the subject positions 'mum' and 'me' as oppositional: 'Hate being identified as " mum"… I am a person!!'. Her use of six exclamation marks in two four-word sentences in line 6, furthermore, suggest that she is fighting to express her individuality; that her claims to individuality are resistant in nature (see appendix Q for further analysis in support of these claims). ████████(The author's) resistance of the potential discourse of 'total motherhood', through her approval of a potential discourse of 'individuality', further evidences the discursive nature of these formations, which seem at the centre of████████ (the author's) intense struggle to define her own subjectivity. The potential discourses of 'total motherhood' and 'individuality', however, do not always compete in this thread; further analysis of a range of posts shows that some participants take up both potential discourses relatively unproblematically in their positioning of self as *both* a 'total mother' *and* an 'individual' (see supporting analysis in Appendix Q).

Despite ██████ (the author's) emphatic resistance to 'being identified as "mum"' and repeated reference to herself as a 'person', she positions herself twice as a 'mum' using the relational process 'became a mum.../ being a mum' in line 2. Her own self-positioning as a 'mum', despite her resistance of this subject position, points to the pervasiveness of this category. She works to avoid positioning herself as a 'total mother', however, in the statement 'a part of who I am, not the whole' (line 3), which reiterates her *partial* identification with this subject position through tautology. Although ██████ (the author) seems to position herself within the potential discourse of 'gendered parenthood', then, she resists being positioned as a 'total mother'.

5.2.2. Exploring 'reference to men' and 'equal parenting'

The theoretical nodes explored in this section are discursively significant because they represent peripheral and competing themes. Giving attention to such themes brings depth to my analysis, providing opportunities to explore what is *unsaid* as well as what is said; what is marginalised and what potential discourses compete with those identified in section 5.2.1. Through the analysis of this section, I further explore and provide evidence for the discursive forces at work in this thread through an exploration of these less prevalent, but no less discursively significant nodes.

Reference to men

References to women, either through self-reference or reference to others, are very common in this thread. To collect all references to women would have been an arduous task and such a node would have quickly become overloaded. The fact that I create a node documenting 'references to men' shows that mentions of men were marked in this thread: that they struck me as unusual and worthy of special attention. As part of my consideration of references to men, then, I will first consider the relative *absence* of references to men in this thread. As noted in section 4.4.1, such themes relating to absence are important because what is *not* said is significant in the identification of discourses.

The very title and opening post of 'Your identity as a mother' (extract 5.1: reproduced below for ease of reference) excludes fathers' identities from the discussion, even in relation to women's subjectivity.

Extract 5.1. Title and opening post - 'Your identity as a mother'.

Your identity as a mother ██████

1. I've been reading a lot of fiction that deals with motherhood and family relationships
2. and I'm curious as to how it changes people, and their view of themselves. Has your
3. perception of who you are changed since you had children? How much of your identity
4. is bound up with being a mum? Do you think the strength of your desire to be a

In this title and opening post, ▊▊▊▊ (the author's) use of the second person pronouns 'you' and 'your', together with gender-specific references to 'mother', 'motherhood' and 'mum' convey a presupposition that her readers are *female* parents, thus constraining the parameters for appropriate participation in this thread. As women cannot, biologically, produce a child without the involvement of men, it can be said that men and fathers are a silent, excluded 'other' in this opening title and post. ▊▊▊▊ (The author) does not invite participants to make male parents, or indeed any other potential carers, relevant in their contributions.

Most contributors to this thread accept the gender-specific agenda set by ▊▊▊▊ (the author). All respondents present themselves as women and as mothers (though many do not adopt the subject position 'mum'/'mother', identifying themselves instead as 'parents' or someone who 'has children'). 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'. A brief look at pronoun references across the whole thread (see tables 5.1 and 5.2) shows that this is a recurring pattern.

Table 5.1. Pronouns referring to the self and/or other women in 'Your identity as a mother'

First person singular pronouns 'I', 'me', 'my'	Third person singular feminine pronouns 'she', 'her' referencing a female carer	First person plural pronouns 'we', 'our', 'ourselves' including the author and other mums/Mumsnet users	Third person singular feminine pronouns 'she', 'her' referencing a daughter
941	27	16	15

Table 5.2. Pronouns referring to men in 'Your identity as a mother'

Third person singular masculine pronouns 'he', 'him' 'his' referencing a male carer	First person plural pronouns 'we', 'our', 'ourselves' including the author and a male carer	Third person singular masculine pronouns 'he', 'him', 'his' referencing a son
9	14	11

The figure of 941 singular references to self in this thread is particular striking when set against the number of 9 singular references to men, or 14 plural references to the contributor *with* a man, demonstrating the absence of men quite vividly. Posts that almost exclusively employ first person singular pronouns, such as ▊▊▊▊ post (extract 5.6; see also analysis of post 86 in Appendix S),

disregard the potential existence of any other parent or carer and often imply the contributor

has total responsibility for children.

Extract 5.6. Post 3 (first person singular pronouns in bold – my emphasis).

███████

1. **I** think **I** am almost entirely Mum. **My** dc are still both under 3 so there's a lot of
2. physical Mumming to do, with breastfeeding, nappies, carrying, bathing etc. **I** don't
3. know if it will be less intense when they're older, and **I** might let myself be a bit more
4. **Me** again, but right now **I** am almost refusing to have an identity beyond Mum.
5. **I** am a bit 'old **Me**' at work, but **I**'m part time now so there's less of that too.

███████ (The author's) use of the possessive pronoun 'my' excludes any others from the
'ownership' of her children. She also defines the tasks of 'breastfeeding, nappies, carrying, bathing

etc.', most of which (except for breastfeeding) can be carried out by any carer, using the gendered

parental term 'mumming'. By creatively manipulating the term 'mum', usually found in nominal form,

she genders these parenting tasks, excluding a male parent (or indeed any other carer) from

potentially carrying them out. Her use of the term 'breastfeeding' – a task that is biologically

gendered, rather than, for example, the gender-neutral 'feeding', together with her positioning of this

gendered act at the beginning of a list of 'mumming' tasks, also works to reinforce the exclusion of a

male or other carer by presenting these tasks as gender-specific; integral to the role of 'mum'. The

predominance of first person singular pronouns in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread is not

surprising, given ███████ (the author's) exclusive emphasis on female parents in the title and

opening post. But there are several recurring statements that could logically break away from this

singular emphasis on female parents, challenging the terms of the opening post. For example, within

the clause 'I have children', which recurs in various forms across the thread (see example below from

post 85), the pronoun 'I' could easily be replaced with 'we' or 'our' with little change to the content of

the post, as it is in the second example reproduced below, from post 9.

Post 85. **I** am expecting **my** first (my emphases)
Post 9. **we** have only one child (my emphasis)

The excerpt from post 9 shows that this participant *is* able to challenge the terms of the opening post

whilst still offering a relevant response, through her use of plural reference to the self plus a second

parent.

Overall, however, patterns of pronoun use in this thread, together with other linguistic

resources such as those identified in post 3, work to silence or erase men as relevant

subjects, pointing to a potential discourse of 'absent fathers'. One could be forgiven, indeed, for

other (male) carers in most participants' lives. For some contributors, this may be the case, though the nature of these online interactions, particularly the limited information available about contributors, 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 absence. It does not seem to be the case, either, that men are absent from this thread because participants share parental responsibilities with female carers, such as female co-parents or other family members: where other carers *are* made relevant, they are always male. This point is telling for another reason, as it indicates that contributors to this thread position themselves as heterosexual parents, even though the men in their lives are largely hidden from view.

Through participants' pronoun choices, they tend to position *themselves* exclusively as the main, if not sole carers for their children. By positioning themselves as the 'main parent', I suggest here that participants position themselves within a potential discourse I will name 'mother as main parent'. This potential discourse seems to complement and merge with the potential discourse of 'absent fathers' identified here: it is legitimised partly *through* the exclusion of men. 'Mother as main parent' is also related to 'total motherhood' (see section 5.2.1), in that it positions women in a fixed, gendered parental subjectivity. It can also, like 'total motherhood', be subsumed within the potential discourse of 'gendered parenthood'.

Exploring moments at which men *are* made relevant in 'Your identity as a mother' reveals that several contributors to this thread present men as different and distinct from themselves. In post 19 (extract 5.7), for example, ▮▮▮▮▮▮ (the author) creates the impression that gendered parental roles are unequal and different through her contrasting presentation of herself and her husband.

Extract 5.7. Post 19.

▮▮▮▮▮▮

1. I agree with **cakes** - I feel as if I am 99% 'mum' at the moment! I know it will pass
2. though, I am a SAHM [stay-at-home-mum] and am looking after three preschool DC all day
3. (plus a fourth who is at school during the day) so I just don't have the time or the energy to be
4. anyone else at the moment.

5. DH [darling husband] does a lot with the children too but at least he has a separate identity
6. because he is out at work and mixes with other people there.

7. I also struggle to spend time away from the DC for more than a night though. I have
8. friends who will happily go abroad on holiday without their DC but I just wouldn't want
9. to do that.

By beginning each of the three paragraphs of her post with a pronoun or noun: 'I' (line 1), 'DH' (darling husband; line 5) and 'I' (line 7), ▮▮▮▮▮▮ (the author) creates a clear physical separation between the main subject of each paragraph. She also uses exclusively singular pronouns when referring to herself or her husband.

Through these linguistic and structural resources, ███████ (the author) positions herself and her 'DH' as separate individuals, rather than a joint unit. Further, ███████ (the author's) self-positioning in a fixed, gendered parental role - as a 'mum' - through the relational clauses 'I am 99% 'mum'' (line 1) and 'I am a SAHM' (line 2) contrasts with her positioning of her husband as someone who undertakes parental activities - who 'does a lot with the children' (line 5). The acronym 'SAHM', further, positions her in the private sphere ('at home'), whereas she positions her husband in an opposing 'work' space. ███████ (The author's) therefore positions herself not just as a 'total mother' (see section 5.2.1.), but also as the 'main parent', whose status as a parent determines who she *is*, whereas her partner's only determines what he *does.*

███████(The author's) representation of a male parent is not unusual in the thread as a whole, as my analysis of MrsP's positioning of her husband in post 66 (see section 5.2.3 and Appendix R) will show. Both participants' references to men differentiate parents according to gender, and in both cases, it is the participants themselves, as *mothers*, who are fixed in parental roles, positioned as the 'main' parents. My exploration of references to men, especially in comparison with references to women, therefore supports my identification of the potential discourse 'mother as main parent'. It is worth noting again at this point that there is no reference at all to women as co-parents in this thread. This points to a further absence in this thread: reference to same-sex parents. This is an absence that is certainly worthy of further exploration, but is not developed here due to the time and space constraints of this thesis.

Equal parenting

The node 'equal parenting' includes references from across the 'Your identity as a mother' thread in which participants both make a second parent relevant to the interaction and position that second parent in a way that suggests they are 'equal' in terms of parental roles (as noted above, in this thread that parent is always male; hence it is a sub-category of the 'references to men' category). As with the other theoretical nodes, 'equal parenting' is also identified as a theme at the data construction stage; the node 'sharing responsibility between parents' (see section 4.3) captures similar references across my corpus of 50 threads. 'Equal parenting' also seems to compete with other themes and potential discourses, especially the two potential discourses identified so far in this section: 'mother as main parent' and 'absent fathers'. Consequently, I identify 'equal parenting' as a potential discourse.

The competing relation between 'equal parenting' and 'mother as main parent' can be identified through close scrutiny of the positioning of men within these potential discourses. Within the potential discourse 'mother as a main parent', for example, men are often positioned

as oppositional to, or at least different from, female participants, as illustrated above. Within the potential discourse 'equal parenting', however, men tend to be positioned as part of an equal, stable unit who act jointly. This can be seen in the following examples, where men are introduced through a range of inclusive pronouns (highlighted in **bold**) such as 'we', 'our' and 'us'.

Post 9. But **we** have only one child and my DH has always done as much as me, which I think makes it less all-encompassing

Post 11. DP [darling partner] does equal amounts of parenting and between **us we** allow **each other** to do **our** own things

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 above.

In post 11 (extract 5.8), ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (The author) uses not just inclusive pronouns, but a wide range of linguistic resources, to present herself and her 'DP' (darling partner) as a unit, with equal parental roles, and thus to position them within a potential discourse of 'equal parenting'.

Extract 5.8. Post 11

Aston University
Illustration removed for copyright restrictions

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

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

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

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

▇▇▇▇▇▇ (The author's) use of the preposition 'between us' (line 7) positions her and her partner in close relation to one another. Her use of lexically and syntactically similar sentences to list the 'things' that they allow each other to do, as illustrated in the form of two 'diagraphs' (Du Bois, 2014) in tables 5.3 and 5.4, implies that they take part in an equal range of activities outside of the home, and that their interests are very similar, therefore again positioning them as subjects of a potential 'equal parenting' discourse: as *equal parents.*

Table 5.3. Diagraph 1 juxtaposing ██████ (the author's) description of herself and her partner (lines 8-9)

Line 8	I	play for	a sports	team
Line 9	He	's training for	a sport	thing

Table 5.4. Diagraph 2 juxtaposing ██████ (the author's) description of herself and her partner (lines 9-10)

Line 9	[I]	regularly organise a meal out	with my girlfriends
Lines 9-10	[He]	meets	his friend

The potential discourse of 'equal parenting' can be seen to compete with 'mother as main parent' and 'absent fathers' here by offering *male* parental subject positions on equal terms with *female* parental subject positions. Further supporting analysis of this post, as well as post 2, in which Yama adopts similar linguistic resources in her approval of the 'equal parenting' potential discourse, is presented in Appendix S.

Despite ██████ (the author's) claims to parental equality, she can still be seen to take up the potential discourse 'mother as main parent' in post 11. For example, in the statement 'DP does equal amounts of parenting' (line 7), ██████ (the author) subtly positions herself as the 'main parent', whose contribution is automatically assumed; the standard by which her partner's parenting contribution is compared. In addition, ██████ (the author) persistently positions herself within a potential discourse of 'gendered parenthood', as a 'mum', throughout her post, in the first line of each paragraph. Her use of the qualifier '100%' in line 4, further, positions her not just as a mother but a 'total mother' (see section 5.2.1.). In line 7, the pre-clause qualifier 'of course' implies that her position as 'mum' in the home environment is obvious and taken for granted: that this subject position, for her, has acquired a 'commonsense legitimacy' (Ellece, 2012; see section 2.4.1). By contrast, she does not position her partner directly as a father or as a parent; he is described as someone who 'does… parenting' (line 7). Whereas ██████ (the author) repeatedly positions herself in a gendered parental role, then, her positioning of her DP is in many ways *not* equal; as in post 19 (see above), this male subject is described, instead, in relation to the things he does. This differentiation of parental roles further supports my identification of a potential discourse of 'gendered parenthood', which constitutes distinct subject positions for parents along gendered lines.

5.2.3. Exploring interrelation, competition and convergence between potential discourses

In this section, I present samples of analysis in which I explore the way the potential discourses identified in sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2 interrelate, converge and compete in two posts from 'Your identity as a mother'. Exploring such moments of convergence, interrelation and competition is of particular relevance for the identification and analysis of discourses because, as I suggest in section 2.4.2, discourses are by their very nature likely to be both interconnected, but also sites whereby power relations are manifested, and therefore likely at times to be oppositional. The linguistic analysis of this section again pays attention to the central nexus of discourse theory: knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 2.4.1). I also draw on the work of both Davies and Harré (1990) and Du Bois (2007) in my scrutiny of the ways in which participants position themselves in relation to others, and in turn, in relation to discourses.

In post 66 (extract 5.9), the potential discourses 'child-centricity' and 'total motherhood' seem to merge, as ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (henceforth 'MrsP') equates total devotion to her children with her role as a 'good mum' and conveys her exasperation with the sense that this role is all that matters in her life.

Extract 5.9. post 66

...

1. At the moment I am filled with the overwhelming sense that I just don't matter. It
2. doesn't matter if I come on my period and am bleeding heavily and just want to take
3. two minutes in the bathroom by myself. It doesn't matter if something I want to hear
4. has come on the news. It doesn't matter if I've had a shit night's sleep. I have tried to
5. talk to DH about it but he just doesn't get it. Last night he responded with "but you're
6. a good mum, and that's what's important." Just completely compounded and
7. confirmed everything I'm feeling. I am the least important person in my own life.

Through her repeated expressions of the notion that her own life does not 'matter' by comparison with her children's lives, MrsP positions herself as a 'child-centred', 'total mother': a subject who is entirely defined by her relation to her children. But the way she communicates this theme suggests that she does not willingly position herself in this way; that she is positioned *by* potential discourses of 'child-centricity' and 'total motherhood'. For example, by listing all the personal sacrifices she makes for her children (lines 2-4), MrsP draws attention to her own unfulfilled needs; to her lack of control over her day-to-day activities. Her repeated use of the negative verbal phrase 'don't/ doesn't matter' implies relentlessness and resentment as she describes all she *doesn't* do for herself. Overall, her post creates an overwhelmingly negative tone that works to contest the legitimacy of these potential discourses, whilst at the same time positioning her as a subject *of* these discourses. The implication that she is positioned in a powerless role, and her use of a range of linguistic resources to

resist this positioning (see Appendix R for supporting analysis), points further to the discursive nature of these formations.

The two potential discourses of 'child-centricity' and 'total motherhood' merge in such a way in post 66 as to suggest that they may in fact come together as *one* discourse that positions women, as 'mothers', entirely in relation to children. This interrelation is perhaps expressed most clearly when MrsP reproduces the 'voice' of her husband, whose words (lines 5-6) subject position her as a 'good mum' and imply that being a good mum is the only important thing in her life. The clause 'but you're a good mum' interprets her list of sacrifices, which MrsP presents as complaints*,* as signs of devotion to her children. The finality of the bald, unmitigated statement 'that's what's important' confirms the implication that MrsP's positioning as a 'child-centred', 'total mother' is *imperative*. Taking account of this analysis, as well as all of the evidence presented in section 5.2.1 that 'child-centricity' and 'total motherhood' are potential discourses that work to constitute knowledge about women, children and parenthood, and to fix women in particular subject positions, I now identify these potential discourses as one discourse. I foreground the defining of women's subjectivities exclusively in relation to children by naming it the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse.

MrsP employs a range of resources in post 66 to resist being positioned by the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse. Her quite explicit reproduction of this discourse through dialogic double-voicing (Baxter, 2014; see section 4.4.3) marks her 'DH' as the 'reproducer' of this discourse. Although MrsP is not able to completely resist the discourse that positions her as a child-centred, 'total' mother, she *can* negatively evaluate and distance herself from her husband, and in doing so, contest and resist the discourse he comes to represent. MrsP distances herself from her husband, first, by quoting him directly, thus positioning him as an 'other' who is depicted as out of tune with her needs. MrsP's use of the verb 'tried' in line 4 and the statement 'he just doesn't get it' in line 5 points to her perceived difficulty in communicating with her husband. Both the verb 'tried' and the intensifier 'just' convey MrsP's effort and exasperation at his lack of understanding. Her use of the same intensifier again in line 6, together with the intensive adverb 'completely', the verbs 'compounded and confirmed' and the rhetorical functions of alliteration and repetition in threes further communicates a feeling of frustration and conflict with her husband and thus resistance to the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse he represents. By positioning her husband as an oppositional subject, MrsP also draws on the potential discourse of 'gendered parenthood'. As with the examples given in section 5.2.2., MrsP's positioning of this male parent, by comparison with the way she positions herself, differentiates parental roles according to gender. Whilst she presents herself as the parent who makes continual sacrifices for her children and is always *with* her children,

for example by listing the personal sacrifices she makes for them (lines 2-4), her statement 'he just doesn't get it' implies that her husband, by contrast, does not make such personal sacrifices and is not always present in their lives. This opposition also works to position MrsP within the 'mother as main parent' discourse, as the parent who undertakes primary responsibility for their children. The convergence of three discourses, 'child-centric motherhood', 'mother as main parent' and 'gendered parenthood' in this post therefore works to very powerfully position MrsP and her husband in oppositional subject positions.

MrsP's closing statement 'I am the least important person in my own life' (line 7) reiterates the tone of resentment and frustration that pervades her post. In this apparently paradoxical final statement, MrsP positions herself as an individual, through her use of the personal pronoun 'I' and the double possessive '*my own* life'. This emphasis on self draws attention to the illogic of her final statement, which implies that this 'self' is suppressed; made irrelevant by her positioning as a 'child-centred', 'total mother', whose *children* are the most important people in her life and define who she 'is'. By positioning herself as an individual, or at least drawing attention to her inability to position herself as such, MrsP can be said to draw on a competing discourse of 'individuality' in order to convey her disapproval and dissatisfaction with being positioned as a 'child-centric' mother.

The intense struggle for self-determination that takes place around the positioning of women as individuals *or* in relation to children, in post 66 and across the 'Your identity as a mother' thread, further points to the significance of 'individuality' and 'child-centric motherhood' here, which I now more confidently identify as *discourses*. The way these discourses compete is illustrated in this sample analysis and is also felt throughout the thread through similar repeated oppositions between the 'self' as an individual and 'mum' as an imposed construction (see section 5.2.1).

In post 13 (extract 5.10), ████████ (the author) can be seen to position herself within a second potential discourse that competes with the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse identified above: 'equal parenting'.

Extract 5.10. post 13

████████

1. Parent is a strong part of my identity, but far from the whole of it even when it's
2. seemed parenting is what occupies all of my time. I felt so much more balanced a few
3. months ago when I managed my first night away from dc2, even though since then
4. the children have had to occupy most of my energy.

5. I feel much more of a parent than a "mum", even when I was breastfeeding (nearly 4
6. years over 2 kids) - I didn't feel anything female -specific since they stopped smelling
7. of my insides.

8. Even with PND [post-natal depression] and stress and pain I never regretted having them,

9. which I think is down to being older and spending years trying to conceive, so I knew I really
10. wanted them.

In section 5.2.2, I suggest that some contributors to this thread take up a potential discourse of 'equal parenting' through their inclusion of fathers or partners in their discussion of children and their own 'identity'. In this post, ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (the author) does not make reference to any parent other than herself, but she does adopt the gender-neutral subject position 'parent' (lines 1 and 5). Where 'mum' can be said to position subjects within a potential discourse of 'gendered parenthood', 'parent' can be said to position them within a competing potential discourse of 'equal parenting', on equal terms with male parents. That these subject positions are oppositional and competing is implied by ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (the author) herself, when she compares them in line 5 and implies that they are mutually exclusive: 'I feel much more of a parent than a "mum"'. ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (The author) justifies her rejection of this subject position in lines 6-7, when she says 'I didn't feel anything female - specific since they stopped smelling of my insides'. Here, she implies that the gendering of parental subjectivity is unnecessary, or irrelevant to her, and therefore contests the commonsense legitimacy of 'gendered parenthood'. This is not, however, the only possible interpretations of ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (the author's) words. It is possible, for example, that ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (the author) aligns with the more generic 'parent' role because she is a single parent. It could also be argued that her self-positioning as a gender-neutral 'parent' does *not* equate to self-positioning as an 'equal parent'. Rather, as I will explain below, there are several points at which she seems to position herself very much as the *main* parent.

Another potential discourse, 'absent fathers', can also be identified through ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (the author's) absence of reference to a male parent in this post. ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (The author's) use of singular pronouns to position herself in relation to her children throughout this post, including 'my' and 'I', as explained in section 5.2.1, works to create the impression that she is the only parent involved in her children's lives (it is not clear from this post whether or not this is actually the case). Her use of the possessive pronoun 'my' in lines 3 and 4 excludes any others from the 'ownership' of, or responsibility for, her children. Her reference to 'breastfeeding' (line 4) and 'smelling of my insides' (lines 6-7), further, draws attention the elements of parenthood that *are* biologically gender-specific, just as ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (the author) does in post 3 (see section 5.2.2). Her reference to these biologically gendered elements of parenthood further excludes male or any other carers from parental care-giving responsibilities. Thus, the two potential discourses 'absent fathers' and 'mother as main parent' merge in this context, working to position ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (the author) as the 'main', or 'default', parent. Further, ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (the author's) statement 'since then the children have had to occupy most of my energy' (lines 3-4) implies that she is consumed by her parental role – that she is positioned entirely in relation to children, thus also drawing in the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse. She also

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reinforces her love for, and devotion to, her children in the statements 'I never regretted having them' (line 8) and 'I knew I really wanted them' (lines 9-10). She emphasises her commitment with the adverbial qualifiers 'never' and 'really'. The way the 'absent fathers', 'mother as main parent' and 'child-centric motherhood' discourses merge and interrelate in this post works very powerfully to position ████████ , like MrsP and many other contributors to this thread, in a fixed gendered subjectivity, despite her resistance to being positioned in this way.

████████ (The author's) positioning of herself as the main parent of her children and complete absence of reference to any other carer, despite her apparent self-positioning within a discourse of 'equal parenting', supports my identification of the two potential discourses identified in section 5.2.2, 'absent fathers' and 'mother as main parent'. The persistence of these discourses, even where, as here, subjects try to resist being positioned by them, further points to the discursive nature of these formations: their power to define forms of knowledge surrounding parenthood and to fix subjects in particular roles. At this point, I therefore more confidently identify both 'absent fathers' and 'mother as main parent', as well as the overarching 'gendered parenthood', within which they can both be subsumed, as *discourses.*

5.2.4. Identifying discourses and significant linguistic resources

I draw out and identify discourses throughout section 5.2 largely through linguistic analyses that focus on the way individuals are positioned, and position themselves, in particular ways. Naming devices, especially pronouns and categories, emerge as particularly relevant linguistic resources in this process.

My analyses first lead me to identify two pervasive discourses in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread:

1. mother as main parent, and
2. child-centric motherhood.

I also suggest that these discourses can be subsumed within a third overarching discourse:

3. gendered parenthood.

The 'mother as main parent' discourse is reconstructed primarily through analysis of the ways in which participants' posts convey a presupposition that *female* parents are the only parents of concern in a discussion of parenthood and identity, thus reinforcing the apparent commonsense legitimacy of this discourse in the context of this thread. This discourse is felt most persistently through the continual elision of men and fathers, as evidenced in participants' pronominal choices

throughout the thread. Though I identify 'absent fathers' as a separate discourse, it can be seen to persistently merge with and affirm the 'mother as main parent' discourse here.

The second discourse, 'child-centric motherhood', is reconstructed largely through an analysis of the ways in which women are positioned, often through categorisation, in this thread. It is initially identified as two separate potential discourses: 'child-centricity' and 'total motherhood' (see section 5.2.1), but analysis of the ways in which these potential discourses merge and interrelate in section 5.2.2 leads me to identify it as one powerful discourse that works to fix women's subjectivity in relation to children.

Contributors to 'Your identity as a mother' are often positioned within a discourse of 'gendered parenthood' through the category' mum', which is pervasive in this thread. By using this category, participants *gender* parenthood, identifying themselves as *female* parents. This discourse is also evident at moments where female and male parents are positioned in oppositional subject positions, thus reinforcing the assumption that they are essentially *different.* I identify several examples throughout section 5.2 of moments at which, even where participants' language choices point to a resistance of this discourse, they continue to identify themselves as 'mums' or 'mothers'. I therefore suggest that the category 'mum' has acquired commonsense legitimacy in this thread, making it difficult for participants to contest the 'gendered parenthood' discourse or adopt alternative subject positions. 'Gendered parenthood' is identified as an overarching discourse that incorporates and merges with the 'mother as main parent', 'child-centric motherhood' and 'absent fathers' discourses.

A fourth discourse, first identified in section 5.2.2, is one that can be said to exist by virtue of *excluded* knowledge and subjectivity:

4. absent fathers

This discourse, and in turn, the related discourse 'mother as main parent', is reconstructed largely through a close examination of the way participants' pronoun choices work to exclude fathers as relevant subjects. Fathers are therefore rendered powerless at many points in this thread; not able to control forms of knowledge surrounding children, parenthood and identity, or even to exist as parental subjects.

The gendered discourses identified so far do not go unchallenged in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread. My analysis suggests, for example, that participants can resist these discourses by taking up two competing discourses, which are *not* gendered:

5. equal parenting, and

6. individuality

A discourse of 'equal parenting' is reconstructed through analysis of the ways in which participants suggest that parents have 'equal' roles, for example in ███████ (the author's) statement 'DP [darling partner] does equal amounts of parenting' (post 11). The 'equal parenting' discourse is reconstructed in part through an examination of participants' adoption of inclusive pronouns, such as 'us', 'we', 'each other' and 'own', which work to position male and female subjects alongside each other, as equals.

Finally, a discourse of 'individuality' is again reconstructed largely through close examination of participants' use of first person pronouns. Whilst the use of first person pronouns such as 'I', 'me' and 'my' do not necessarily position participants within a discourse of 'individuality', participants' double-reference to self in statements such as 'I am me' (post 14; see section 5.2.1), *does* position them emphatically as individuals, sometimes in direct opposition with being positioned as mothers, as shown in section 5.2.1.

5.3. Analysing discourses at play in an interactional sequence

As explained in section 4.4.4, the final part of my analysis focuses exclusively on how Mumsnet users are positioned by, and position themselves in relation to, the discourses identified in section 5.2.4, drawing on the work of Davies and Harré (1990) and Du Bois (2007).

In order to conduct this in-depth discursive analysis, I identify a 'significant moment' within the thread as a whole (see section 4.4.4). I narrow my focus initially by identifying moments at which the discourses identified in section 5.2.4 seem to converge, interrelate and/or compete. As I suggest in section 5.2.3, moments of convergence, interrelation and competition are fruitful sites for the identification and analysis of discourses. Post 59 is a particularly striking example of one such moment. In this post, there is an intense negotiation of women's subjectivity, which can be seen through ███████ representation of the oppositional subjects she categorises as 'the "if you have any time for yourself you're neglectful" brigade', and 'one of the most devoted mum (*sic*) I know'. Post 59 does not operate in isolation, however; it can be considered part of an interactional sequence to which the participants ███████, ███████ and ███████ contribute. Further examination of this sequence reveals that, through this interaction, participants jointly construct and negotiate the defining characteristics of a group variously labelled as 'attachment parents', 'AP mums', and 'the "if you have any time for yourself you're neglectful" brigade'. This group is presented as powerful and dominant at times, but this power, the value of the knowledge they are said to impart and the validity of their positioning as particular 'types' of parents, is contested in

multiple ways. Contributors to this sequence also work to adopt a powerful position for themselves, through repeated comparison between, and evaluation and categorisation of, 'self' and 'other'. I therefore identify the sequence of which post 59 is a part as a 'significant moment' within the thread, because it seems to revolve around the central nexus of discourse theory: it is a site of struggle (Baxter, 2003; see section 4.4.4), of contested knowledge, power and subjectivity.

The catalyst for the interactional sequence that will be analysed here comes in post 37, written by an anonymous user who did not consent for her post to be used here. This Mumsnet user is the first to introduce the category 'attachment parent' with reference to a colleague who, she suggests, uses the label to make an exaggerated statement about 'who she is'. The subsequent posts reproduced in extract 5.11 respond to post 37, to each other, and address the overall question of the thread – what is your identity as a mother – with a focus on how parental subjectivity can be defined by particular schools of thought such as 'attachment parenting' (see section 5.1.1).

Extract 5.11. A significant moment from 'Your identity as a mother'

1. That does make sense, **username removed***. I don't know anyone like that in RL [real life] but I
2. do occasionally come across posters on MN [Mumsnet] whose comments can make me think what
3. you think. It is a sense of deciding on and then clinging to an identity as an attachment parent,
4. unconditional parent etc.

5. In other circumstances I would wonder whether someone who decided so deliberately to
6. define themselves but (*sic)* one characteristic or belief was unsure of themselves, but I don't
7. know whether that would apply to mothers.

8. I suspect - crap cod-psychology here - that for some people who deliberately define
9. themselves but (*sic*) something such as, for example, attachment parenting, they are doing it
10. as an extreme way of explaining or confirming their decisions. That might be completely
11. wrong but sometimes it is the impression I get - I am right, I AM!

*author of post 37

Aston University
Illustration removed for copyright restrictions

1. [username removed] - May I ask what fiction you have been reading?
2. Interesting topic and I am someone who practised "attachment parenting" much derided
3. above. Why did I do it? Because I was doing all those things associated with attachment
4. parenting and then heard the label and rather liked the fact that I could parent that
5. intensely as it suited my obsessive nature. I read everything there was to read about
6. parenting to make sure I was doing it right.

7. My life revolved around the DC and my identity disappeared (It's starting to recover after
8. almost 7 years).

Aston University
Illustration removed for copyright restrictions

1. **[tagged quote from post 37 – removed]**

2. This is very interesting as an older pregnant woman (through medical necessity not choice,
3. which might have a bearing on my own perceptions) who is one of the last of her peers to
4. have a DC.

5. I almost notice from the "outside" looking in that some *do* have a certain way - e.g. a
6. book/movement/lieftyle- of parenting that they define themselves by: but it's almost like
7. being part of a tribe, rather than inherently to do with being a mum IYSWIM [if you see what I
8. mean]? Lots of judgement and looking at the way other people do things and defining by the binary
9. opposite.

10. Can you guess some have been a PITA [pain in the arse] already lecturing me (good mums don't,

11. apparently, wear make-up: that money/time could be spent on PFB [precious first born]).

12. Interestingly one of the most devoted mum in terms of practical things and passionate
13. adoration of PFB I know (of child with a disability requiring lots of care and special input) is
14. very much - and vocally - her "own woman" *with* her child by her side IYSWIM.

15. I'm actually a bit terrified of the "if you have any time for yourself you're neglectful"
16. brigade. As I mentioned above, if anything I'll end up accidentally attached ~~or just spoil~~
17. ~~PFB~~ due to PFB being a bit of a miracle... but I would like to be *allowed* to be me. 😊

1. ⬛⬛⬛⬛ - I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound as if I was deriding attachment
2. parenting.
3. I was using it as an example; currently I am more aware of parents who follow
4. attachment parenting who have it as an entire ethos of their life, but I don't mean to
5. suggest it is the attachment parenting itself which is bad. Whatever works for you and
5. your baby 😊 It just seems to be the current outrider for a parenting style/theory that is
6. very strongly embraced and used to define most of what a parent does. A decade or two
7. ago it would probably have been GF [Gina Ford – childcare 'expert' and author].

   …*

*second part of post omitted; strays from topic of sequence. See Appendix D for full post.

⬛⬛⬛⬛⬛

1. ⬛⬛⬛⬛ no offence taken. I know what you mean by the AP [attachment parenting] "tribe". I
2. never felt a part of that as I worked part time and the local AP "mums" (proving that I am as guilty as
3. anyone of identifying people purely by the characteristic that they've given birth" I knew were all
4. white middle class SAHMs who didn't seem to mix much outside their tribe and frequented
5. singing groups and created their own toddler group.

6. I used to go to my local children's centre in the poorer area of the city where I lived and
7. there was much more of a mix of ages, cultures and classes.We were of course brought
8. together by the fact that we had DC though so in that way we did have to first identify as
9. mums to find common ground

The 'child-centric motherhood' discourse is strongly evident throughout this sequence. In post 56, for example, ⬛⬛⬛⬛ (the author's) claim that her 'life' is peripheral to and dependent upon her children suggests that, as an 'attachment parent', she is positioned exclusively in relation to children:

'My life revolved around the DC and my identity disappeared' (post 56, line 7)

⬛⬛⬛⬛ (The author's) use of the intransitive verbs 'revolved' and 'disappeared' here place children at the centre of, and indeed position them as more important than, her own life. They also imply that her 'life' and 'identity' are separate entities, over which she has no control. This sentence suggests that ⬛⬛⬛⬛ (the author's) subjectivity is controlled by a discourse that positions her in relation to her children and in a relatively

powerless position. The way the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse can work to fix female subjects in imperative and powerless roles is made further apparent in post 59, where ██████ reproduces this 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, contributors to this sequence work to challenge and resist being positioned by this discourse. These 'others', who ██████(the author) labels as the '"if you have any time for yourself you're neglectful" brigade' in lines 15-16 of post 59, are given various names in this sequence, but the defining feature to which most contributors return is that they can be broadly labelled as 'attachment parents'. Contributors to this sequence negatively align with the 'attachment parenting' group, and thus resist the discourse they come to represent, largely through persistently negative evaluations. For example, in post 39, ██████ (the author) implies the group have an unreasonable and extreme commitment to a particular ethos of parenting through her use of the adjective 'extreme' (line 10) and her repeated use of superlative and intensifying language in post 60, as in the phrases 'entire ethos' (line 3), 'very strongly embraced' and 'define *most* of what a parent does' (line 6, my emphasis). Further, ██████ (the author) implies that members of this group are not in a position to make logical, rational decisions when she speculates that they are 'unsure of themselves' (line 6). ██████ negatively evaluates the group in even more explicit terms in post 59, with her use of the negative descriptor 'PITA' (pain in the arse – line 10). The tone of the reported speech she attributes to this group, such as 'good mums don't… wear make-up' (lines 10-11), suggests that they are unreasonable, domineering and extreme and her use of the verb 'lecturing' (line 10) to frame this reported speech implies (outside of an educational context) that they have an over-inflated sense of their own importance. Her use of the category 'brigade' (line 16) further implies that this group is large in size, expert in their field and potentially hostile or combative (see Appendix R for further analysis to support these points).

Participants' shared negative alignment with this group also works to position them in *positive* alignment with each other. As well as the shared general disapproval illustrated above, at times the specific terms of participants' disapproval are strikingly similar. I describe this strategy as *affiliative* double-voicing, where individuals echo or repeat the words of others (see section 4.4.3). For example, ██████ (post 80, line 1) repeats ██████(post 59, line 7) use of the label 'tribe' to negatively evaluate attachment parents as a group. ██████ (post 39) and ██████(post 59) both

use generic, impersonal naming devices such as 'some' (██████, lines 5 and 10), 'someone' (██████, line 5) and 'some people' (██████, line 8), which work to position members of this group as nameless, anonymous 'others'. They also both imply that this group force themselves into a false identity by referring to their attempts to 'define themselves' (line 6 in both posts) in particular ways.

██████ and ██████ also use a range of mitigating devices to invite a wider group of readers to collaborate in the joint construction of and negative alignment with the 'attachment parenting' group. For example, ██████ (post 39) uses speculative verbs such as 'wonder' (line 5), 'suspect' (line 8) and 'don't know' (lines 6-7), modals such as 'would' (line 5) and 'might' (line 10) and adverbs such as 'sometimes' (line 11), to frame her constructions as hypothetical and uncertain. ██████ (post 59) uses similar mitigating devices such as the tag question 'IYSWIM' (if you see what I mean - lines 7 and 14) and mitigating qualifiers such as 'almost' (lines 5 and 6) and 'actually' (line 15) to frame her construction of this group as provisional; dependent on the acquiescence of her readers (see further examples and analyses in Appendix T). This interactive, collaborative and negotiational style contributes to the construction of an in-group who work together in the construction of an out-group and collectively disapprove the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse they come to represent. Contributors to this sequence also position both themselves and each other as part of a wider in-group of Mumsnet users by assuming shared understanding of specialist terms such as 'attachment parent' and 'unconditional parent', and by employing resources that are common throughout this discussion forum (see Appendix B), such as:

- 'tagging' other users: 'That does make sense, **username removed**';
- acronyms: 'MN', 'DC', 'PFB'[2];
- smileys: '☺', and
- strikethrough text: '~~or just spoil PFB~~'.

In post 56, ██████ (the author) works to challenge the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse through negative evaluation of her *own* behaviour as a subject of this discourse. For example, she uses the adjective 'obsessive' to describe herself in line 5. Through this negative evaluation of self, she also implies positive alignment with others who resist this discourse, such as ██████. She further resists being positioned by this discourse in post 56 through her tentative self-categorisation as 'someone who practised "attachment parenting"' (line 2). This self-categorisation does not straightforwardly position her as an 'attachment parent'; her use of the impersonal pronoun 'someone' also works to distance her from this category. She also avoids the category

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[2] The use of acronyms such as DC (darling children) and PFB (precious first born), as well as the pervasive DH (darling husband) and DP (darling partner) are interesting not only because they indicate shared knowledge and understanding between users. They also suggest that the naming of family members in exclusively positive terms is a standard practice within the site; that the positioning of children, husbands and partners as 'darling' and 'precious' is taken for granted, perhaps even compulsory. This is a point worthy of further exploration in itself.

'attachment parent' itself, describing her association with this group, rather, as one of *action* – she is 'someone who *practised* "attachment parenting"' (line 2, my emphasis), rather than *being* an 'attachment parent'. Her use of the past tense 'practised' further emphasises her negative alignment with this group, suggesting that even if she did once belong to it, she does not any longer. Finally, ██████████ (the author's) use of inverted commas around 'attachment parenting' implies that her words are double-voiced: that she is adopting the words of others in her use of this term. This strategy again works to distance her from the 'attachment parenting' group. In post 80, (the author) further emphasises her negative alignment with this group, and her resistance of the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse, through her adoption of ██████████ negative evaluative category 'tribe' (line 1). ██████████ (The author's) shifting and at times double-stanced self-positioning across two posts shows how complex and multiple discursive relations can be in this thread: participants are not always, and in fact very rarely, positioned exclusively and unproblematically in relation to a single discourse.

In order to indicate what they as a group approve of, participants also draw on a competing discourse of 'individuality' as part of their resistance to the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse. In post 59, ██████████ (the author) introduces this competing discourse through the voice of another, the 'devoted mum' she describes between lines 12 and 14. The self-possessive 'own' within the label 'her "own woman"' (line 14) works to suggest that this individual is in control of her life; that she is able to determine her own subjectivity and is not controlled by others. The way ██████████ (the author) positions *children* in relation to this 'devoted mum' also draws on the 'individuality' discourse. Where, in lines 10-11, the child ('PFB' – 'precious first born') is positioned in a passive role, the child of line 14 is positioned as co-existing *alongside* this 'devoted mum', through use of the prepositions 'with' and 'by [her side]'. This positioning of adult and child points to their co-existence as separate individuals, with neither being entirely reliant on the other. ██████████ (The author) approves the 'individuality' discourse by positively aligning with this 'devoted mum', through positive evaluations such as 'devoted', 'passionate adoration', 'care' and 'special input'.

██████████ (The author) also positions *herself* as an 'individual' through her use of the personal pronoun 'me' in her closing statement 'I would like to be *allowed* to be me' (line 17; her emphasis). ██████████ too, draws on a discourse of 'individuality' in post 56, where she highlights her inability to position herself as an individual through the words 'my life revolved around the DC and my identity disappeared' (line 7; see above analysis). In post 80, ██████████ (the author) successfully takes up a discourse of 'individuality' by positioning herself as both an active and individual subject, in the statement 'I worked part time' (line 2). This self-positioning contrasts with her categorisation of the 'local "AP mums"' as 'SAHMs' (stay at home mums, line 4), which positions them as subjects of the

'child-centric motherhood' discourse, in a fixed, exclusive role as female parent ('mum') and in the private sphere ('at home').

Despite their approval of a competing discourse of 'individuality', ████████ and ████████ persistently take up and approve the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse. ████████ positive evaluations of the 'devoted mum' in post 59, for example, position and positively evaluate this individual *in relation to her child*, as does the categorisation of her child as a 'PFB' (precious first born – line 13), in which the evaluative qualifier 'precious' not only positively evaluates the child, but also the parent, as 'doting' or 'devoted' for describing them in this way[3]. The category 'devoted mum' itself positions this individual as a female parent, who is evaluated in relation to, and so whose 'status' is dependent on, her relation to her child. Further, ████████ (the author) positions *herself* in relation to her child in the final lines of her post (lines 16-17) through her use of the verb 'attach' and her repetition of the category 'PFB'. These examples show that, although ████████ (the author) does successfully challenge the *exclusivity* of women's positioning in relation to children through negative evaluation and alignment with the group that come to represent the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse and by approving a competing discourse of 'individuality', she can still be seen to persistently position women in relation to children in her post.

In post 80, ████████ (the author) challenges the 'child-centric motherhood', and perhaps also the 'gendered parenthood' discourse by self-reflexively questioning her own use of the category 'mums'. She draws attention to the way this category positions women in a gendered parental role by using inverted commas to mark the category as not her own choice of term; not her own 'voice':

'local AP "mums" (proving that I am as guilty as anyone of identifying people purely by the characteristic that they've given birth" *(sic)*' (lines 2-3)

████████ (The author's) use of anticipatory double-voicing here (Baxter, 2014), where she pre-empts the judgement that she is 'guilty… of identifying people purely by the characteristic that they've given birth', shows that she senses possible criticism of her use of the category 'mum'; that she recognises the way it can work to restrict women's subjectivity. Nevertheless, she continues to use the category, in line 4 within the acronym 'SAHMs' (stay at home mums) and in line 9, this time without inverted commas, suggesting that this is her own 'single' voice; part of her normal repertoire. ████████, like ████████ and ████████, seems to focus her resistance of the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse on the exclusive and fixed positioning of women in relation to

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[3] As noted above, the pervasiveness of the naming device PFB (precious first born) in Mumsnet Talk suggests that it is common, expected and even compulsory for Mumsnet users to describe children in exclusively positive terms.

children. Her persistent positioning of herself and others in relation to children, even where she seems to resist the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse, further suggests that it is difficult to resist in this interactional context.

The 'mother as main parent' discourse is not as evident in this sequence as it is at other points in the thread. However, a proliferation of categorisation, evaluation and negotiation of women's subject positions, for example as 'good', 'neglectful' or 'devoted' mothers, together with the complete absence of reference to men in this sequence, does further evidence and affirm the commonsense legitimacy of the three related discourses 'gendered parenthood', 'mother as main parent' and 'absent fathers'. For example, in post 80, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (the author's) persistent use of the gendered parental category 'mums', both in relation to herself and the 'local AP "mums"', works to erase the potential presence of fathers in the lives of women and their families, creating an impression that women are the sole carers for children and that parents occupy distinct subject positions along gendered lines: as 'mothers' and 'fathers'.

Contributors to this thread also take up a discourse that directly competes with the 'mother as main parent' discourse in this sequence: 'equal parenting'. In post 39, for example, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (the author) displays a preference for gender-neutral categories and labels such as 'parent', 'posters on MN' and 'some people'. In the extract from post 60 that is quoted here (extract 5.11), she employs exclusively gender-neutral references, using 'parent/parenting' a total of 6 times between lines 1 and 6. Similarly, in post 59, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (the author) uses only the gender-neutral 'parenting' and 'parent'. These participants' avoidance of the gender-specific terms 'mum' or 'mother' in a thread titled 'Your identity as a mother' is striking and so comes across as quite a deliberate attempt *not* to position themselves as gendered subjects, and thus also to resist being positioned by a discourse of gendered parenthood.

However, even where participants adopt gender-neutral categories in this sequence, they can still be seen to exclude men, or other carers, from their posts. For example, in post 56, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (the author's) persistent use of 'I' and 'my' in relation to her parental role and her relationship with her children implies that she is the only carer of her children; or at least the *main parent* (see similar analyses in 5.2.2 and 5.2.3). In post 59 (line 6), ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (the author) uses the gender-neutral 'parenting', but her subsequent and persistent use of 'mum', in both her single and double-voiced discourse, suggests that even when she refers to 'parenting', there is an assumption that she is referring to the parenting of *women*. Similarly, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ uses almost exclusively gender-neutral references in post 39, but her statement "I don't know whether that would apply to *mothers*" (lines 6-7, my emphasis) reveals her concern, primarily, with female subjectivity in this context. In post 60,

██████ use of second person pronouns in the statement 'whatever works for *you* and *your* baby' (lines 4-5, my emphasis) excludes any others, such as a father, from an interest in this child. The discourse of exclusion, 'absent fathers', together with the 'mother as main parent' discourse, can again be seen to merge in these examples.

The analysis of this section shows that Mumsnet users employ a range of resources to position themselves in relation to discourses of gendered parenthood. The linguistic resources highlighted in section 5.2.4, pronouns and categories, continue to be significant here. For example, I find that participants position themselves and others in relation to discourses through their adoption of categories and pronouns such as 'I', 'parent' and 'mum', including the evaluative categories 'good mums' and 'devoted mums', which work to explicitly position and evaluate women in relation to children. Double-voicing (Baxter, 2014) and evaluation become more significant in this analysis of the way contributors position themselves and others in relation to discourses. These resources are adopted by ██████, for example, in her categorisation of 'the "if you have any time for yourself you're neglectful" brigade' (post 59, lines 15-16), where she uses dialogic double-voicing (Baxter, 2014) to negatively evaluate this group and thus resist the discourse that they come to represent.

What is most striking in this sequence is participants' vehement resistance of the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse through their construction of and negative alignment with a group that come to represent this discourse. Participants draw on a range of competing discourses to act out this resistance, including discourses of 'individuality' and 'equal parenting'. However, discourses of gendered parenthood, including 'child-centric motherhood' and 'mother as main parent', continue to permeate participants' interactions, even where they make efforts to resist them. This analysis therefore suggests that whilst participants deploy a range of resources to challenge and resist discourses that work to fix them in gendered subject positions, it is difficult for them to escape these forces.

5.4. Self-reflections

In this chapter, I have subjected the thread 'Your identity as a mother' to intense critical scrutiny, particularly the words of selected participants, namely ██████, ██████, ██████, ██████ and ██████. In the spirit of self-reflexivity, I subject my own role in the research process - what I bring to this analysis - to the same critical scrutiny (Mason, 2002; see section 4.2).

In order to scrutinise my own reading and analysis of the 'Your identity as a mother' thread, I first identify some of the experiences and perspectives I bring to my research. For example, I categorise

myself as a mother, a feminist, and as broadly middle class. I have a family that I consider to be quite 'normative', in that I am in a heterosexual (married) relationship with the father of my two children, we live together in our own home and neither of us have any other dependents. My own upbringing, however, did not meet any of these 'normative' criteria. I also emphasise the similarities I perceive between myself and the broad group I categorise as 'Mumsnet users', and my support of Mumsnet as a community (see sections 4.3.1 and 4.7). It is with reference to some of these self-categorisations and perspectives that I attempt to confront my own presence in the analysis of this chapter.

First, to my own role as a parent. I only have to look at samples of my own writing on the internet to see that, like many contributors to 'Your identity as a mother', I identify myself to others, variously, as a 'mum'; a 'mother'; a 'mother of two'. In my message to potential participants, for example, I identify myself as 'a mother to a 4 and 5 year old' (see Appendix J). In a piece of writing titled 'Mother's Day Reflections' (see Appendix U), posted to my research blog in March 2014, I not only identify myself as a 'mother', but also, like so many contributors to 'Your identity as a mother', obscure my husband from view, in statements such as:

I'm always there for my children, I'm told. I've nurtured them, supported them, picked them up from school, cleaned the house, cooked their tea, washed their clothes. I deserve a rest. And the truth is that I have. And I do.

Yet my personal responses to the thread, recorded in memos such as the one sampled in extract 5.12 (see Appendix N for further examples) reveal that I too, like many of my participants, am resistant to being positioned as a 'mum'.

Extract 5.12. excerpt from reading 1 memo

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Some cling to 'the real me' identity very fiercely, rejecting the 'mum'
identity. I felt I could really identify with this, and sometimes felt that
I reacted negatively to posters who very much identified as 'mums'.
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These examples show that I am subject to the same gendered discourses as the participants whose words I analyse, as well as the same tensions, contradictions and competing subject positions, making it potentially quite easy to position myself within the 'Your identity as a mother' thread. Yet, by virtue of my position as analyst, and as an *observer*-participant (see section 4.3.1), I also position myself outside of the interaction. This self-positioning is arguably necessary; in some ways, it is only by distancing myself from my own subjectivity that I am able to 'see' the discourses to which I myself am subject, to make the familiar strange (Erickson, 1990). Whether I *am* able to completely 'step outside' of these discourses is questionable, and I acknowledge that, despite my best efforts, there may be aspects of my analysis that betray my inability to do so.

My values, experiences and self-positioning do not only affect my research, but are also affected *by* my research (see section 4.7). Through my scrutiny of the way Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to discourses, I invariably scrutinise the way I position *myself* in relation to discourses. I have found, for example, that since conducting the analysis presented in this chapter, I am very conscious of the way I categorise myself and others, often very self-consciously choosing the category 'parent' and taking care not to position myself as the sole carer for my children, not to erase my very much present husband by speaking only of 'my' children. In the process of constructing this thesis, then, I have indeed made the familiar strange, drawing my own attention to some of the ways in which I regularly position myself, and am positioned, and the assumptions that my linguistic choices can sometimes betray. The fact that I find myself adjusting my linguistic choices in order to resist being positioned by the discourses presented in this chapter, I would argue, suggests that I *have* been able, to an extent, to distance myself from and thereby identify the very discourses to which I am subject.

Another aspect of my analysis that I have repeatedly questioned and scrutinised is my identification and categorisation of 'men', 'women', 'mothers' and 'fathers'. I am aware that my analysis repeatedly draws on the gender binary to categorise individuals, and that in doing so, I am reinforcing dichotomous gender categories, particularly as they relate to parents. I justify this by noting that I reproduce participants' *own* use of gendered categories, such as 'husband'/ 'DH', 'he' and 'his'. I am careful to confirm, for example, that all references to carers other than the contributors themselves *are* identified as 'male', rather than assuming that this is the case. However, some presuppositions certainly come in to play where I point to the absence of fathers. When co-parents or carers are omitted from the interaction, I have no way of knowing who they are; how they may identify themselves or how participants may identify them – or if they even exist at all (see section 5.2.2). It is therefore an assumption that it is male parents; 'fathers', who are absent in this thread. This assumption perhaps reveals my own attachment to heteronormative ideals about the 'nuclear family'. Identifying silences and absences, however, must ultimately rely on *some* presuppositions, and I would argue that they are not unwarranted in this case, given that all references to additional parents in this thread *are* identified as men, and that, indeed, in my whole corpus of 50 threads, no reference is made to non-male co-parents (although carers such as grandparents, both male and female, are sometimes mentioned).

In relation, again, to my identification of absent fathers, I note that my analysis itself can be said to marginalise men and fathers. Where I do analyse representations of men, I tend to do so in relation to what they reveal about women. In a thesis that focuses on the discursive construction of

motherhood, and draws exclusively on the words of participants who present themselves as women and as mothers, I necessarily focus on *female* subjectivity. However, I draw attention here to the way in which my focus and my analysis itself can be said to legitimise the 'mother as main parent' discourse, and highlight the need for further research into constructions of *fatherhood*, or perhaps, dispensing with the gender binary, of *parenthood.*

5.5. Summary and conclusion

The contributions made by this chapter include the development of methods that are effective for the identification and analysis of discourses in Mumsnet Talk. My inductive, emergent approach leads me to identify six discourses at play in this thread:

1. gendered parenthood;
2. mother as main parent;
3. child-centric motherhood;
4. absent fathers;
5. equal parenting, and
6. individuality.

The analytical process through which these discourses are identified and analysed draws on a number of influences. For example, my focus on knowledge, power and subjectivity is both the central nexus of discourse theory (see section 2.4.1) and of my analysis. Thus, I focus on how Mumsnet users draw on particular forms of knowledge to position themselves, or indeed, how they may be *positioned by* forms of knowledge. Further, I consider how Mumsnet users may be positioned as relatively powerful, or powerless, at particular moments, and what resources they draw on to influence these power relations.

Identifying and analysing the interactions *between* discourses is a central part of my analysis. For example, I find that the 'mother as main parent', 'child-centric motherhood' and 'absent fathers' discourses, which can be subsumed within the overarching 'gendered parenthood' discourse, often compete directly with the more peripheral 'equal parenting' and 'individuality' discourses, as where participants work to position themselves as 'individuals' or 'equal parents', and in doing so, resist being positioned as 'mothers' or 'main parents'. However, these discourses are also often linked in more surprising and subtle ways, so that participants can be seen at times to position themselves, for example, as main parents, child-centred parents *and* equal parents. Some discourses frequently combine, such as 'absent fathers' and 'mother as main parent', which often reinforce one another and as a result become more powerful and pervasive in the interaction.

My analysis suggests that the overarching discourse of gendered parenthood and the closely related 'child-centric motherhood' discourse are particularly pervasive in the 'Your identity as a mother'

thread. I also show, however, that some participants draw on a range of resources to resist being positioned by these discourses. For example, some contributors negatively align with various 'others' who come to represent these discourses. Some can also be seen to position themselves in positive alignment with other Mumsnet users, drawing on the collective alliance of the Mumsnet community in their approval or disapproval of particular discourses. However, despite the way contributors to 'Your identity as a mother' can be seen to challenge, resist and negotiate discourses of gendered parenthood, these discourses often continue to permeate their interactions, for example through pervasive naming devices such as 'mum', sometimes preceded by evaluative adjectives such as 'good' and 'devoted'. Thus, my analysis suggests that it can be difficult for Mumsnet users to escape the forces that work to persistently fix them in the gendered subject position 'mother', and position them exclusively in relation to their children.

In the chapter that follows, I identify and explore the discourses at play in a contrasting thread from Mumsnet Talk, 'Can we have a child exchange?', before bringing the findings of both analyses together in the discussion of chapter 7.

Chapter 6. Analysing the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread

6.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I focus on a second thread from the Mumsnet Talk forum, 'Can we have a child exchange?' As with 'Your identity as a mother' (see chapter 5), my analysis of this thread proceeds in several steps, which are outlined in figures 4.1 and 5.1 (see sections 4.1 and 5.1). The structure of this chapter also follows that of chapter 5. In this section, I outline my aims for the chapter and introduce the thread that will be analysed here. Section 6.2 relates to the coding, initial analysis and identification of discourses in this thread (see section 4.4). This analytical process leads me to identify several discourses, which are outlined in section 6.2.3, together with a summary of the main linguistic features through which these discourses are evidenced. In section 6.3, I use a sequence of posts from the thread to explore, in more depth and detail, the ways in which Mumsnet users are positioned and position themselves in relation to discourses. The analysis presented in this chapter continues to draw on the work of Davies and Harré (1990) and Du Bois (2007) in order to conceptualise the relationships between individuals, the communicative resources available to them, and wider discourses. I also draw on Ochs' (1992) concept of indexicality and Goffman's (1974) frame analysis to support my exploration of the wider social meanings and cultural assumptions that can be implicated by particular linguistic resources (see section 4.4.1).

My aims for this chapter are similar to those identified in chapter 5, with some slight adjustments (see italics). These are to:

- identify the discourses at play in the *'Can we have a child exchange?'* thread and consider how they are significant (section 6.2);
- investigate the ways in which Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to these discourses (sections 6.2 and 6.3);
- consider whether Mumsnet Talk offers resources that facilitate or constrain its users' opportunities to construct transformative discursive positions;
- explore whether, and how, Mumsnet users are positioned as gendered parental subjects in these digital interactions (sections 6.2 and 6.3), and
- *develop and adapt* the methods identified in chapter 5 for the *identification and analysis of discourses in a different Talk thread* (section 6.2).

6.1.1. Introducing the thread

As noted in section 4.3.6, I identify 'Can we have a child exchange?' for close, qualitative analysis because it seems to be a fruitful site for exploring the relevance of gender in Mumsnet users' interactions. This thread contrasts with 'Your identity as a mother', as participants adopt a much more playful and humorous style, and tend not to address the theme of motherhood directly. By

analysing this thread alongside 'Your identity as a mother', I am able to offer a more diverse set of analyses and capture something of the spirit of Mumsnet Talk interactions in a qualitative context (see section 4.3.6).

The opening post to 'Can we have a child exchange?' (extract 6.1) introduces its premise: a mock-exchange of children. Subsequent posts to this thread (see Appendix E) tend to adopt a similar style and structure, with participants introducing their children, describing their qualities and 'offering' them for exchange. These posts seem to mimic what I call 'classified advertisements': short written advertisements so called because they were traditionally found in the 'classified' section of print newspapers. In the twenty-first century, this sort of advertisement is now more commonly found on internet sites such as, in the UK at least, eBay, a popular online auction site, or Gumtree, which more closely follows the format of traditional paper 'classified' advertisements, in that they have local divisions and sellers set a fixed price (see section 4.4.1).

Extract 6.1. Opening post - 'Can we have a child exchange?'

██████████

1. I can offer one (currently) sweaty and exuberant 5 year old. Reads most things. Speaks some
2. German. Quite helpful around the house.

3. Reason for sale: Excessive farting.
                    😆
4. Any takers?

In section 6.3, I focus on a sequence of seven posts from 'Can we have a child exchange?' in which there is evidence of an interplay between participants. In contrast with the sequence selected for analysis in section 5.3, I do not identify the sequence to be analysed here as a 'significant moment' *per se*, in that it is not necessarily more discursively significant than other moments in the thread. I choose it, rather, because it is broadly representative of the thread as a whole (see section 4.4.4). As with the previous chapter, any acronyms or abbreviations used in extracts from 'Can we have a child exchange?' are glossed in square brackets after first use. In addition, all of the acronyms that feature in the two threads selected for close analysis are listed at the start of this thesis.

6.2. Coding, initial analysis and identifying discourses

My analysis of 'Can we have a child exchange?', as with 'Your identity as a mother' (see section 5.2), begins with the process of focused and theoretical coding (see section 4.4.1), which leads me to identify four theoretical nodes for further exploration:

- the classified advertisement frame;
- indexing femininity;

- indexing class, and
- child-centricity.

(see Appendix G1 for a list of all nodes created at this stage)

These are all categories within which a number of sub-categories are subsumed, and each contain a high number of aggregated references. The last of these nodes, 'child-centricity', addresses a theme already introduced in section 5.2. The remaining three nodes, however, introduce new themes. These nodes are also different from those explored in chapter 5 because they are more explicitly focused on groups of linguistic features.

I use a similar structure to present my exploration of these nodes as in chapter 5, introducing the theoretical nodes 'the classified advertisement frame', 'indexing femininity', 'indexing class' and 'child-centricity' separately in section 6.2.1, where I develop my theorisation about the potential discourses at work here. In section 6.2.2, I explore the ways in which these potential discourses interrelate, compete and converge in more detailed analyses of two posts from the thread. My exploration takes in the central nexus of discourse theory: knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 4.4.2); that is, it considers whether and how the potential discourses I identify early in this process constitute forms of knowledge, position subjects and inscribe power relations. These analyses ultimately lead me to more confidently identify several discourses, which are outlined in section 6.2.3.

6.2.1. Exploring 'the classified advertisement frame', 'indexing femininity', 'indexing class' and 'child-centricity'

The classified advertisement frame

I note in section 6.1.1 that posts to the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread are written in the style of classified advertisements. The classified advertisement genre is very much out of place in the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum; the idea of exchanging or selling children is extremely subversive and incongruous with the goals of the Mumsnet website, which are to pool knowledge, advice and support for parents (see Mumsnet Limited, 2015). The unlikely and subversive nature of this interaction, however, is exactly what makes it so clearly playful and humorous: readers are likely to understand instantly that there will be no literal exchange of children. The transposition of the classified advertisement genre to Mumsnet Talk can therefore be most accurately described, as Goffman (1974: 59) puts it, as a 'technical redoing': it is the 'frame' governing the specific 'principles of organization' that shape participants' interactions. There is no expectation that the usual outcomes of classified advertisements will occur here. This process of transposition is described by Goffman (1974) as 'keying' (see section 4.4.1).

I delineate the particular 'principles of organization' of classified advertisements with reference to Bruthiaux's (1996) study of the discourse of classified advertisements from the U.S. Some of the conventions identified by Bruthiaux (1996: 44-131) include:

- omission of function words such as articles, pronouns, auxiliaries, 'be' copulas, modal verbs and some prepositions and conjunctions;
- descriptions and evaluations;
- heavy modification of noun phrases through listing;
- idiomatic sequences and collocations;
- long adjectival/nominal/verb chains;
- abbreviations, and
- ritualistic structures (especially openings and closings).

The classified advertisements of extracts 6.2 and 6.3 illustrate the use of these conventions in practice.

Extract 6.2. automobile advertisement (from Bruthiaux, 1996: 64)

```
88 DODGE DAYTONA. Black with grey interior. PS. P/B. Automatic,
am/fm. Stereo cass. 28,000mi, excellent condition. Extremely
reliable. $5000. obo…
```

Extract 6.3. personal advertisement (from Bruthiaux, 1996: 65)

```
33, GREAT LOOKING SJM brownish blonde hair, blue eyes, excellent
shape. Intelligent, secure, romantic. Loves outdoors, theatre, arts,
travel, Jacuzzis. Call…
```

Through my coding of 'Can we have a child exchange?', I collect the linguistic features that are typical of classified advertisements in the 'classified advertisement frame' category (see Appendix G2), with the exception of abbreviations (which are present in the thread but not singled out in my analysis as they are used across Mumsnet Talk) and ritualistic structures (which, again, are present but not singled out in the coding process). These features are very similar to the conventions of classified advertisements listed above (see table 6.1, Appendix V, for a clear comparison). The sub-categories of this node include:

- ellipsis;
- describing children (including the sub-categories 'negative evaluations' and 'positive evaluations');
- heavily modified nouns;
- stock phrases, and
- objectification of children.

The extent to which contributors to 'Can we have a child exchange?' key the classified advertisement frame varies from one post to the next, but the majority of the 53 posts that I collected display

enough of these features to make the frame identifiable. Some are strikingly similar to the classified advertisements of Bruthiaux's (1996) study, such as ███████ post (extract 6.4).

Extract 6.4. post 52.

███████

1: Twenty-one, driver, non-smoker, recent graduate. Self-caring but tendency to wake
2. early and pace the floor.

3. Model 2: Twenty, excellent cook and percussionist. Extreme clothing abuse (floordrobe currently
4. occupying 2 rooms of the house).

5. Model 3: Screen-bound thirteen year old. Obsessed with Lego and Geomag. Likes cats but
6. couldn't eat a whole one.

7. Free to good home.

This post, like extracts 6.2 and 6.3, begins with a ritualistic opening, whereby the 'object' for 'sale' is introduced, includes extended descriptions, evaluations, ellipsis and listing, and ends with a ritualistic close (line 7), which alludes to the transaction process through an idiomatic, or 'stock' phrase. These parallels are clearly displayed in table 6.2. ███████ (The author's) extensive keying of the classified advertisement frame in post 52 is typical of many posts to this thread (see Appendix V for further analysis to illustrate this point). Participants' persistent keying of this frame gives the thread a playful quality. It creates a prevailing sense that what is said is not necessarily what is meant (Bateson, 1972; see section 3.4.2); that this is an ostensibly non-serious thread, in which participants experiment with what can and cannot be said about children, and Mumsnet users' position in relation to them.

Table 6.2. A comparison of the structure and style of post 52 with two classified advertisements from Bruthiaux (1996).

	Ritualistic opening: Identifying object for 'sale'	Description 1 (including ellipsis and extended descriptions/ evaluations through listing)	Description 2 (including ellipsis and extended descriptions/ evaluations through listing)	Ritualistic close: transaction/ contact details (including idiomatic phrases)
███████ **post 52**	Model 1:	Twenty-one, driver, non-smoker, recent graduate.	Self-caring but tendency to wake early and pace the floor.	Free to good home
Bruthiaux (1996: 64) auto advertisement	88 DODGE DAYTONA	Black with grey interior. PS. P/B. Automatic, am/fm. Stereo cass. 28,000mi, excellent condition.	Extremely reliable	$5000. obo… [or best offer]
Bruthiaux (1996: 65)	33, GREAT LOOKING SJM	brownish blonde hair, blue eyes, excellent	Intelligent, secure, romantic. Loves	Call…

personal advertisement		shape.	outdoors, theatre, arts, travel, Jacuzzis.	

The transposition of the linguistic conventions of classified advertisements to Mumsnet Talk interactions not only creates a playful, non-serious tone, but also superimposes a commercial perspective on motherhood, women and their relation to children. The linguistic conventions of classified advertisements work to position children as objects for sale, thus commodifying them, as in the following excerpts:

Post 37. I can offer a lovely 4.5 month old baby girl who is getting desperate to eat

Post 4. I've got am (*sic*) extremely useful 11yo DD [darling daughter]

In these examples, the 'object' for sale (the child) is introduced in an extended noun phrase. The commodification of the children in question can be identified through participants' choice of the indefinite articles 'a' and 'an'. These choices de-emphasise any relationship between author and child (where a personal pronoun such as 'my', for example, would emphasise this relationship). Participants' choice of categories, too, creates distance from the child: the categories 'baby girl' and '11yo', for example, make no reference to the relationship between author and child, where a category such as 'daughter' or 'son' would. Positive and evaluative adjectives such as 'lovely' and 'extremely useful' are more personal, but their intensifying function also emphasises the competitive element of these posts, which is prominent in most promotional genres (Bhatia, 2005). Thus, children's positive qualities are emphasised as if to promote them in a busy marketplace.

Similarly, in the following excerpts, participants again distance themselves from the children they describe, this time by listing their attributes, and through elision of the subject:

Post 1. Reads most things. Speaks some German. Quite helpful around the house.

Post 73. Total bookworm, very sporty and is a Minecraftaholic.

The way children are objectified and competitively pitted against one another in all of these descriptions positions them as subjects of a potential discourse of 'commercialisation'. I use the term 'commercialisation' because it captures the *business* element of this mock exchange; the framing of the thread as a sales opportunity, with contributors emphasising the saleability of their children. By positioning their interactions within a potential discourse of 'commercialisation', Mumsnet users frame the process of raising children as both a commercial and a competitive endeavour, positioning themselves as the 'producers' of children as commodities and children as the products of this endeavour. They can also be said to position themselves in opposition with each

other, pitting themselves and their children against one another in a bid to claim that they have the most valuable 'product'. At the same time, however, the operation of this potential discourse through the playful keying of the classified advertisement frame means that these values are also subverted from the start: there is a sense that what is said is 'not meant' (Bateson, 1972; see section 3.4.2). The ways in which this potential discourse operates and the subjects it produces will be explored in more detail in the analyses of sections 6.2.2. and 6.3.

The effects participants create through their keying of the classified advertisement frame, it should be noted here, are primarily *humorous.* Posts to this thread are generally funny and witty, and presumably designed to be so. This no doubt explains the popularity of the thread – it is entertaining and comes across, on first reading, as a bit of fun. But this humour, I would argue, arises only because participants have a mutual understanding of the values they are subverting, the multiple meanings with which they play, and the stereotypes upon which they draw. Some of these meanings and stereotypes are explored below.

Indexing femininity

It is not only the linguistic conventions of classified advertisements that recur in this thread. There is also a proliferation of linguistic features that are associated, stereotypically, with 'feminine' speech styles. I collate such features within the category 'indexing femininity' (see Appendix G3), which includes the sub-categories:

- intensifiers;
- affective emphasis, and
- intensive adjectives.

Following scholars such as Holmes (2000), Holmes and Stubbe (2003) and Mullany (2007), I draw on 'second wave' gender and language research as a starting point in my identification of these linguistic features as indices of femininity (see sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.4). Intensifiers and affective emphasis have been widely associated with a stereotypically feminine 'affectively oriented' style (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). The way participants draw on such indexical resources, and the effects they subsequently create, are explored below and in the sections that follow.

Contributors to 'Can we have a child exchange?' frequently deploy 'intensive' adjectives in descriptions of their children. For example, they use words such as 'charming', 'sweet', 'lovely' and 'cute' to describe their children in positive, emotive terms. Through the coding process, I identify a number of other similarly 'intensive' adjectives, most of which refer to the innocent, youthful attractiveness of children, or their kind, pleasant dispositions, including 'delightful', 'wonderful',

'gorgeous', 'angelic' and 'marvellous'. I also include intensive adverbs in my analysis, where they serve a similar function of approval and/or indicate an emotional or personal response. The most common intensifying adverb in this thread is 'very', though between them participants use a wide range of similar variants such as 'extremely', 'truly' and 'exceptionally'. Again, these adverbs are usually deployed in participants' descriptions of their children. I suggest that Mumsnet users draw on these resources to index cultural stereotypes around femininity (which are linked to western ideals of 'good' motherhood); namely, the cultural expectation that women orient towards an affective interactional style. The subtle effects that participants achieve by deploying these indexical resources will be further explored in section 6.2.2.

In the digital context of the Mumsnet Talk forum, Mumsnet users also have at their disposal various typographical resources, including italics, bold, capitals, punctuation and 'smileys', to create what I describe here as 'affective emphasis'. The following excerpts illustrate participants' use of intensive adjectives or adverbs *and* a range of digital resources such as bold font, capitals, punctuation and smileys to add affective emphasis when describing their children.

Post 4. I've got am extremely useful 11yo DD. Reason for swap? 3 gazillion wayward loom bands that she **needs** inhher (*sic*) possession at all times.

Post 11. he's lovely to snuggle and smells nice 😊

Post 44. **PLEASE SOMEBODY TAKE MY 5 YR OLD DS BEFORE MY HEAD EXPLODES WITH HIS CONSTANT CHATTERING!!!!**

Post 58. She is VERY cute though 😊

In examples such as these, participants' descriptions of their children can be described as affectively oriented. ▇▇▇▇▇▇ and ▇▇▇▇▇▇▇ use of the qualifiers 'extremely' and 'VERY' (which is also capitalised for extra emphasis), for example, intensify the positive descriptions of their children as 'useful' and 'cute'. ▇▇▇▇▇▇ and ▇▇▇▇▇▇ use of bold type (and in the latter case, also capitalisation and exclamation marks) emphasises their emotional response to their children's behaviour. Such affectively oriented utterances can be said to index a 'feminine' style of interaction, and thus work to position contributors as *female* parents.

Further analysis of the thread leads me to identify another widely cited 'feminine' interactional style in Mumsnet users' interactions here: collaboration (see section 3.2.1). Collaboration can be achieved, for example, through jointly constructed utterances, where two or more speakers work together to create a single utterance, or through simultaneous or overlapping speech, where conversational topics are developed in a 'multilayered' way. It can also be created through repetition across speaker turns, which may include repetition of syntactic structures, specific lexical items or

terms from the same lexical field, to potentially signal agreement or alignment with others (Coates, 1996). The asynchronic nature of the Mumsnet Talk forum is such that it would be difficult for contributors to achieve truly 'collaborative' interaction in the ways that Coates (1996) describes. It is not strictly possible, for example, for participants to contribute 'simultaneously', or for posts to overlap. It is also not likely that a contributor would complete another's utterance: Mumsnet users have the luxury of taking time to find the right words before posting to the forum, so would be unlikely to post an unfinished message. However, contributors to this thread *do* participate in a way that can be described as 'collaborative' in other ways. For example, they collude, without specific instruction, in the keying of the classified advertisement frame, adopting a similar style, syntax and vocabulary, as shown above. Furthermore, I have suggested above that contributors to this thread often adopt similar lexical items in descriptions of their children, such as the intensive adjective 'lovely', which is used nine times across the thread, by 8 different participants, and 'cute', which is used five times by five different participants. Such repetition of similar vocabulary can be described as affiliative double-voicing (see section 4.4.3), and it creates a sense of collaboration and mutual alignment between contributors.

Contributors to this thread also use a collaborative style of humour. As I have already suggested, humour in this thread relies on participants' collusion in a genre parody. ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (post 1) and ▇▇▇▇▇▇ (post 17) display such humour when they juxtapose the formal and serious style of classified advertisements with banal expressions relating to everyday life with children, in the following statements:

Post 1. Reason for sale: Excessive farting

Post 17. Recent hobbies include: Biting your head

Such 'in-jokes' rely on shared investment in the parodic, ironic style of the thread. These excerpts are very similar in structure, both beginning with an elliptical, idiomatic phrase, then a colon, which is followed by a verb phrase that captures the child's undesirable behaviour.

Participants' use of an affectively oriented, collaborative style can be said to draw on cultural stereotypes around, and thereby to *index,* femininity. By using interactional resources stereotypically associated with femininity to describe their children, I suggest that Mumsnet users position themselves within the discourse of 'gendered parenthood', first introduced in section 5.2.1. This discourse constitutes distinct and binary parental subject positions along gendered lines, producing feminine mothers and, by extension, masculine fathers.

Contributions to this thread, however, are not exclusively collaborative, and they do not exclusively draw on stereotypes around feminine interactional styles. For example, ▮▮▮▮▮▮ and ▮▮▮▮▮▮ humorous complaints have a competitive quality; their 'in-jokes' can be seen as examples of a sort of competitive one-upmanship, with successive contributors claiming both that 'my child is more difficult than yours' and 'my joke is funnier'. Such examples of competitive complaint can be found across the thread (see Appendix Y for further analyses to support this point). In addition, many contributors use expletives or mild taboo expressions, such as 'excessive farting' (post 1), 'shit' (post 49) and 'snot monsters' (82), which can also be said to subvert stereotypes of femininity. There are multiple possible interpretations of such language choices and interactional styles. For example, their use of swearing could also be read as indexical of a stereotypically *masculine* interactional style (see Pedersen and Smithson, 2013; section 3.4.3). However, it could also be argued that, if swearing and aggressive language is common across the Talk forum, as Pedersen and Smithson (2013) suggest it is, then contributors' use of expletives and taboo expressions may also serve to create alignment with a wider in-group of Mumsnet users. Contributors' competitive one-upmanship, too, could be read as collaborative rather than competitive; as an example of positive alignment through adoption of similar linguistic resources (see section 5.3). Contributors themselves may have entirely different explanations for their linguistic choices.

The contrast between, on the one hand, participants' persistent adoption of linguistic indices of femininity, and on the other hand, their subversion of such linguistic stereotypes, draws attention to the playful and parodic nature of their self-positioning. Thus, contributors to this thread can be said to position themselves as female parents, as 'mothers', within a discourse of gendered parenthood, but at the same time to caricature and resist this subject position. This is consistent with the playful tone of the thread as a whole, which creates a sense that what is said is not always what is meant.

Indexing class

In section 3.2.5, I emphasise my hesitance to make claims about individuals' 'class', a contested concept in itself, on the basis of variables such as income, educational history and cultural interests. I am particularly hesitant to make such claims in an analysis that relies solely on the isolated interactions of a set of individuals about whom I have no background information. To be clear, I will not make any attempt in this chapter to place contributors to this thread in class categories. However, I *do* claim that they often allude to indices that have been tied to class, drawing on the table of class indices I present in section 3.2.5. Such indices of class can be conceptualised as resources that are available to Mumsnet users to position themselves as particular types of parents.

The category 'indexing class' (see Appendix G4) includes two sub-categories that capture thematic and linguistic patterns relating to the economic, cultural and linguistic resources available to Mumsnet users:

- formal, sophisticated linguistic choices, and
- reference to wealth, culture, opportunity.

The node 'formal, sophisticated linguistic choices' collates references that deploy, for example, complex syntactical structures, or formal, sophisticated vocabulary. In the following excerpt from post 66, ███████ (the author's) description of her children exemplifies some of the very formal, complex syntactical structures used in this thread. This unusually complex sentence can be divided into multiple clauses, as illustrated below:

Clause 1 Their days are spent
Clause 2 accidentally breaking apart fiendishly complex Lego constructions and
Clause 3 wailing for help in reconstruction,
Clause 4 as their ability to see what to do and understand lego instructions is greater than their ability to accomplish it,
Clause 5 due to lack of coordination.

Two of these clauses also have very complex internal structures, such as clause 2, which includes extensive modification through a range of adjectives, adverbs and adjectival or noun phrases.

This excerpt also includes formal and sophisticated lexical items, such as 'fiendishly', 'reconstruction', 'copious' and 'riotous'. Similar lexical items can be found across the thread, as shown in the following excerpts (see bold highlights):

Post 49. [H]e would… be as happy as a pig in the **proverbial** shit 😁

Post 50. ~~have v **hilarious delusions**...~~

Post 73. Will swap for squish new born due to **rampant** broodiness

By using such linguistic resources, I suggest that participants display their communicative competence as it is relevant to spheres such as higher education and professional contexts. Thus, they point to an educational and occupational background that is beyond the centre of the class continuum set out in table 3.3 (see section 3.2.5), indexing a broadly 'middle class' identity.

In many cases, participants' use of formal, sophisticated lexical items such as these are positioned alongside rather more everyday (in the digital context), informal lexis such as 'shit' (post 49) and 'squish[y]' (post 73), smileys (post 49) and abbreviations such as 'v' for 'very' (post 50). They also coincide at times with linguistic and visual resources that are particularly common within the Mumsnet Talk community, such as the strikethrough text of post 50. These examples show that it is not just participants' use of sophisticated and complex lexis and syntax that displays their

communicative competence, but also their ability to negotiate a range of registers and styles in their production of utterances that are extremely well matched to context. The linguistic resources they deploy can be said to satisfy a number of functions: to create a humorous exchange, to share stories about their children and to critique the demands discursive forces place upon mothers. That participants' posts can capture this range of functions is, in itself, quite a striking demonstration of the range of communicative resources they have at their disposal and the sophisticated ways in which they are able to deploy these resources.

As well as drawing on a range of communicative resources, many contributors to this thread also draw on economic and cultural resources in the descriptions of their children. References that illustrate this point are captured in the node 'reference to wealth, culture, opportunity'. For example, in the following excerpts, participants emphasise their children's various skills, talents, academic successes and intelligence (see bold highlights):

Post 52. Model 1: Twenty-one, driver, non-smoker, **recent graduate**. Self-caring but tendency to wake early and pace the floor

Model 2: Twenty, **excellent cook and percussionist**. Extreme clothing abuse (floordrobe currently occupying 2 rooms of the house).

Post 55. She's very clean and tidy and has been known to clean down the kitchen, empty the dishwasher and make a batch of choc chip cookies if bored after school. Her sausage rolls are also amazing…

At most other times she is to be found **sitting with pen in hand**, or **typing away on her novel**.

Post 87. She's lovely, she's bright, chatty and well-behaved. She's also **training her voice in classical soprano singing**. All day. Every day. Non-stop.

By drawing attention to their children's intelligence and ambition in examples such as 'recent graduate' and 'typing away on her novel', participants position themselves as parents who are able to provide their children with opportunities to succeed in academic and workplace arenas: who have access to a wealth of cultural and economic resources. Going to university and learning to play an instrument, for example, are both likely to involve significant financial investments. That these participants refer to their children's interests in, for example, opera singing and playing musical instruments also points to the cultural resources at their disposal. These Mumsnet users' references to culturally 'highbrow' activities (Bourdieu, 1984; see section 3.2.5) like writing a novel or classical singing are deployed with what Savage et al (2015: 98) identify as a 'cultural confidence' characteristic of 'privileged' people. The casual ease with which such references are added to a list of other skills or qualities suggests, for example, that being a 'recent graduate' is no more striking a quality than being a 'non-smoker'; that writing a novel is as everyday, for these contributors' children, as cleaning the kitchen.

This analysis leads me to claim that constructions of parenthood in 'Can we have a child exchange?' are not only divided along gendered lines, as in 'Your identity as a mother', but also along *classed* lines[4]. Participants' persistent use of indices of class together with indices of femininity in descriptions of children across the thread leads me to suggest that a potential discourse of 'classed parenthood' is also at play here. This discourse positions parents in classed subject positions, for example, as is the case in this thread, as 'middle class' parents. As before, however, contributors to this thread do not position themselves in a 'middle class' subject position in any straightforward way. In a thread that is ostensibly playful and humorous, contributors can be said to both take up, but also resist and subvert, this subjectivity.

'Child-centricity'

The 'child-centricity' node created through my coding of 'Can we have a child exchange?' (see Appendix G5) includes sub-categories that, as in 'Your identity as a mother' (see section 5.2.1), capture participants' positivity towards and commitment to their children, such as:

- putting children first;
- expressing love for, pride in children;
- desire for children, and
- describing children.

In section 5.2.3, my analysis of the way the potential discourses 'child-centricity' and 'total motherhood' intersect leads me to identify a discourse I name 'child-centric motherhood'. I suggest here that the same discourse can be evidenced in this thread, through close linguistic analysis of references from the 'child-centricity' node.

The opening post to this thread (extract 6.1) invites participants to paint a vivid picture of their child(ren) through detailed descriptions, in keeping with the conventions of the classified advertisement frame. Through these detailed descriptions, participants position themselves exclusively in relation to their children: any sense the reader has of who they are is gained through the impression created of who *their children* are. Though it tends to be achieved in different ways, this focus on and positioning in relation to children echoes the self-positioning of many contributors to 'Your identity as a mother' as child-centred mothers, such as ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ and ▮▮▮▮▮▮ (see section 5.2.3).

As the thread develops, contributors' descriptions and evaluations of their children come together to construct an image of the 'perfect child': one who is intelligent and/or ambitious, has a special

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[4] Furthermore, as noted in section 5.2.2, there is an assumption (made quite explicit in 'Your identity as a mother') that contributors position themselves as heterosexual parents.

'gorgeous', 'angelic' and 'marvellous'. I also include intensive adverbs in my analysis, where they serve a similar function of approval and/or indicate an emotional or personal response. The most common intensifying adverb in this thread is 'very', though between them participants use a wide range of similar variants such as 'extremely', 'truly' and 'exceptionally'. Again, these adverbs are usually deployed in participants' descriptions of their children. I suggest that Mumsnet users draw on these resources to index cultural stereotypes around femininity (which are linked to western ideals of 'good' motherhood); namely, the cultural expectation that women orient towards an affective interactional style. The subtle effects that participants achieve by deploying these indexical resources will be further explored in section 6.2.2.

In the digital context of the Mumsnet Talk forum, Mumsnet users also have at their disposal various typographical resources, including italics, bold, capitals, punctuation and 'smileys', to create what I describe here as 'affective emphasis'. The following excerpts illustrate participants' use of intensive adjectives or adverbs *and* a range of digital resources such as bold font, capitals, punctuation and smileys to add affective emphasis when describing their children.

Post 4. I've got am extremely useful 11yo DD. Reason for swap? 3 gazillion wayward loom bands that she **needs** inhher (*sic*) possession at all times.

Post 11. he's lovely to snuggle and smells nice

Post 44. **PLEASE SOMEBODY TAKE MY 5 YR OLD DS BEFORE MY HEAD EXPLODES WITH HIS CONSTANT CHATTERING!!!!**

Post 58. She is VERY cute though

In examples such as these, participants' descriptions of their children can be described as affectively oriented. ▇▇▇▇▇ and ▇▇▇▇▇ use of the qualifiers 'extremely' and 'VERY' (which is also capitalised for extra emphasis), for example, intensify the positive descriptions of their children as 'useful' and 'cute'. ▇▇▇▇▇ and ▇▇▇▇▇ use of bold type (and in the latter case, also capitalisation and exclamation marks) emphasises their emotional response to their children's behaviour. Such affectively oriented utterances can be said to index a 'feminine' style of interaction, and thus work to position contributors as *female* parents.

Further analysis of the thread leads me to identify another widely cited 'feminine' interactional style in Mumsnet users' interactions here: collaboration (see section 3.2.1). Collaboration can be achieved, for example, through jointly constructed utterances, where two or more speakers work together to create a single utterance, or through simultaneous or overlapping speech, where conversational topics are developed in a 'multilayered' way. It can also be created through repetition across speaker turns, which may include repetition of syntactic structures, specific lexical items or

ostensibly in relation to their children, as loving mothers.

Figure 6.1. Image from post 44

Aston University

Illustration removed for copyright restrictions

There is one post to this thread that is markedly different from others in that it breaks away from the classified advertisement frame, and in doing so also breaks away from the pattern of devoting posts to descriptions of children. In post 82 (extract 6.5), ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (henceforth 'Goblin') also breaks a dominant pattern in the thread by making explicit her own role in 'shaping' her children's personality and behaviour in a way that other participants do not (see Appendix X for further analysis to support this point).

Extract 6.5. post 82

▮▮▮▮▮▮

1. No.
2. I've spent years training mine to be useful human beings with an eye to them keeping their
3. Dear Old Mum in style and we're almost there. 😆
4. I come home to the washing up, laundry and hoovering done. If I want to add a job, I post it on
5. the fridge door and the 6' bearded elf does it whilst I'm at work. The other Elf cooks and scrubs
6. things until they are shiney.
7. Keep your squealing snot monsters that wake up at ungodly hours of the morning please, I like
8. the tranquility of a silent Saturday am.

Because the traits Goblin attributes to her children are 'preferred' (they are helpful and clean), she positions herself as a parent who has done a good job; a 'good parent'. By association, she also positions parents whose children have dispreferred attributes as *not* having done a good job: as potentially *bad* parents. Goblin's use of the extended category 'your squealing snot monsters that wake up at ungodly hours of the morning' (line 7) to name and negatively evaluate others' children reinforces this implication that some others have not done a 'good' job of raising their children. This categorisation positions other contributors as 'owners' of their children, through the possessive pronoun 'your'. Thus, Goblin extends these criticisms beyond the children themselves to their parents, who by implication are ultimately responsible for them. By drawing attention to parents' relationship to, and responsibility for, their children, and juxtaposing *positive* evaluations of her own children with *negative* evaluations of others' children, Goblin makes explicit the link between evaluations of children and evaluations of mothers in a way that other participants do not. She can

therefore be said to more clearly take up, and approve, the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse, and also to highlight the more subtle ways in which other contributors position themselves within this discourse, through descriptions of their children that are predominantly positive.

6.2.2. Exploring interrelation, competition and convergence between potential discourses

In section 6.2.1, I identify two new potential discourses at work in the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread: 'commercialisation' and 'classed parenthood', as well as re-introducing the 'gendered parenthood' and 'child-centric motherhood' discourses. In this section, I show some of the ways in which these potential discourses merge and interrelate in samples of analysis from two posts to 'Can we have a child exchange?' In my analysis of these extracts, I continue to explore the complexity of participants' self-positioning in this thread, drawing attention, for example, to moments at which they simultaneously approve and resist the discourses that are outlined here, as well as moments at which they are resisted more explicitly.

Post 51 (extract 6.6) exemplifies such multiple self-positioning in 'Can we have a child exchange?'

Extract 6.6. post 51.

██████████

1. I have on offer an 8.5 yr [year] old DS, who is lovely and kindhearted, but can talk about
2. Minecraft for at least an hour before pausing for breath. He also wishes to become a virologist
3. when he grows up, and has (in his mind, anyway) recently invented a cure for the common
4. cold, which he also natters endlessly on and on and on about. He is trying to rope me in to
5. getting him a market stall (a precursor to him having a chain of stores - or is it better to just
6. sell the recipe for millions instead, Mummy?) and helping him sell it! Has a voice like a
7. FOGHORN, even his 'whispering' can be heard in the street outside. Does sleep very well
8. though.

9. Alternatively, I have DS2 - who is 2 next week. Looks utterly angelic - blonde, big
10. blue eyes, very cuddly. But again, voice like a FOGHORN, like a duracell bunny, just starting
11. the whole tantrums phase, and STILL wakes 4-5 times a night!

12. Willing to swap for any silent, monosyllabic or grunting teenagers who enjoy staying in their
13. rooms a lot. Don't care if they can make tea or not as long as they sleep lots!

In this post, ████████ (henceforth 'Microbat') takes up the full range of (potential) discourses identified in section 6.2.1. For example, she can be said to position herself within the discourse of 'gendered parenthood', as a *female* parent, by drawing on resources that are indexical of femininity (as outlined in sections 3.2.1 and 6.2.1) in the descriptions of her children. These include the intensive adverbs 'utterly' (line 9) and 'very' (lines 8 and 10) and the intensive adjectives 'lovely' (line 1), 'angelic' (line 9) and 'cuddly' (line 10). Microbat also uses capital letters for affective emphasis, drawing attention to her negative personal reaction to her son's behaviour with her capitalisation of 'FOGHORN' (lines 7 and 10) and 'STILL' (line 11). Other descriptions can be said to position her within a potential discourse of 'classed parenthood'. Her sophisticated, formal lexical choices such as

'virologist' (line 3) and 'wishes to become…' (line 2), for example, display a communicative competence that would be highly valued in educational and professional spheres (see section 3.2.5 and 6.2.1). She also emphasises her family's access to economic resources in the statement 'He also wishes to become a virologist when he grows up, and has… recently invented a cure for the common cold' (lines 2-4). Here, she implicitly suggests that her child has access to a good education and is likely to enter a very well-paid profession that will entail years of university education. By emphasising her son's educational and professional potential, Microbat positions herself as a 'middle-class' parent, who has access to a range of cultural and economic resources to support this path for her child. At the same time, her lengthy descriptions serve to commodify her children, labelling them in terms of their desirable qualities, skills and virtues and thus positioning them within a potential discourse of 'commercialisation', as objects of scrutiny. Her positioning of her children as 'products' of her parenting also draws on the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse. Together, these discourses can be seen to merge in this post, working to position Microbat as a gendered, classed subject who is entirely responsible for her children as 'products' and is positioned and evaluated in relation to her children. At this point, I name the subject that is constituted through these interdiscursive relations as the 'good mother'. My choice of this label is influenced by my literature review on the theme of 'motherhood' (see section 3.3), which suggests that femininity, child-centricity and middle-class values have persistently been tied to cultural assumptions around the notion of 'good' mothering.

In a second post from the thread (extract 6.7), ⬛⬛⬛⬛ (henceforth 'Whispers') draws on a similar set of linguistic resources to position herself as a subject of these intersecting discourses; as a 'good mother'.

Extract 6.7. post 58.

⬛⬛⬛⬛

1. I will take a newborn during the day or a teenager who spends all day in their room 😆 (the
2. driving 21yo [year old] sounds ideal, but looks like someone's already bagged them) I have a
3. ~~PITA~~ cheeky 4 yo who NEEDS to go to school now, I'll have him back at the beginning of
4. September 🙂 He likes crafts (covering every surface in glitter and using copious amounts of
5. prittstick and PVA glue), the park and Frozen.

6. Also have a princess and horse obsessed nearly 3yo. She is very emotionally complex, so good
7. luck figuring her out 😆 Very bossy, definitely the ruler of our household. She is VERY cute
8. though 🙂

Here, Whispers also draws on a range of resources that are indexical of femininity, adding affective emphasis through the capitalisation of 'NEEDS' (line 3) and 'VERY' (line 7), smileys (lines 1, 4, 7 and 8), and intensifiers such as 'very' (lines 6 and 7) and 'cute' (line 7). She also uses some formal,

sophisticated lexical items such as 'copious' (line 4), revealing a similar type of linguistic competence to that displayed by Microbat (see above). Whispers can therefore be said, like Microbat, to position herself within the (potential) discourses of classed and gendered parenthood: as a 'good mother'. However, neither of these participants adopt this subject position unequivocally. As explained in section 6.2.1, the humorous, ironic and playful premise of the thread result in a dual self-positioning, where Mumsnet users both take up, but also simultaneously subvert and resist this subjectivity. It is participants' playful keying of the classified advertisement frame that leads to the potential for multiple possible meanings in almost every statement they make. When they adopt this frame, contributors' posts, on a literal level, become very subversive. At the same time, however, participants suggest that their implied indifference to their children is laughable; inconceivable, even; that what they say is not what is meant. Similarly, the pervasive irony of the thread suggests that the demands placed upon participants, to be entirely responsible and accountable for their children, are also laughable. The irony and humour that pervades the thread therefore leads to the simultaneous reproduction and subversion of the potential discourses that merge to produce the 'good mother' subject. Thus, it becomes impossible to disentangle internalised self-positioning as the 'good mother' from deliberate, ironic and playful critique of this subject position.

Some of the linguistic resources Whispers uses in post 58 (extract 6.7) more explicitly draw attention to this dual self-positioning. For example, between lines 2 and 5, Whispers uses strikethrough text and brackets to mark the hearably positive (or at least not negative) evaluative descriptions 'cheeky' and 'likes crafts' as euphemisms. However, Whispers does not completely avoid the 'indelicate' expression 'PITA' (line 2 – pain in the arse); instead, she 'hides' this description deliberately badly, using strikethrough text to mask it, and so suggest that it is dispreferred and subversive, but not completely erase it. Whispers' use of the self-censored taboo expression 'PITA' marks the euphemistic expression 'cheeky' as part of a 'performance' of the expected, or acceptable, behaviour of the 'good mother' subject. These examples of 'double-speak' point to an underlying power struggle within the playful contributions of this thread. By drawing attention to 'accepted' and 'unaccepted' forms of expression, contributors such as Whispers highlight the difficulty for women, as parents, to escape discourses that work to position them as 'good mothers'. The implication is that, as subjects positioned by these discourses, women are expected to describe their children in particular ways, for example to evaluate them in positive terms even where their behaviour can be interpreted as negative or destructive. Such 'double-speak' (which will be explored further in section 6.3) is one form of resistance Mumsnet users deploy to both draw attention to and distance themselves from the 'good mother' subject position.

The layers of meaning that can be uncovered in participants' self-positioning as the 'good mother' subject point to a discursive struggle surrounding motherhood and women's subjectivity in this thread. These struggles to define forms of knowledge and subjectivity further evidence the discursive nature of the potential discourses introduced in this chapter: 'classed parenthood' and 'commercialisation', as well as 'gendered parenthood' and 'classed parenthood', which I now identify more confidently as *discourses.*

6.2.3. Identifying discourses and significant linguistic resources

In my analysis of 'Your identity as a mother' (chapter 5), I show that I identify discourses in part by pinpointing the subject positions participants adopt through personal pronouns such as 'I' and categories such as 'mother'. It is again through a focus on participants' subjectivity that I draw out and evidence the following discourses in this chapter:

- gendered parenthood;
- classed parenthood;
- commercialisation, and
- child-centric motherhood.

'Can we have a child exchange?' is less ostensibly 'about' participants' identities, and so does not contain the same repeated reference to and categorisation of self as in 'Your identity as a mother'. Nevertheless, participants do work to position themselves as particular types of subjects in this thread. They do so largely by drawing on indexical resources and through descriptions and evaluations of their children. I therefore identify the following linguistic resources as being particularly significant in the identification and analysis of the discourses identified above:

- indices of gender and class;
- conventions of the classified advertisement frame, and
- evaluative forms (including adjectives, adverbs, verbs and categories).

The discourses of 'gendered parenthood' and 'classed parenthood' are identified almost exclusively through an examination of participants' use of indexical resources, which can take a range of forms. The indexical resources of particular relevance in this analysis include:

- intensive adjectives and adverbs;
- digital resources to add emphasis, such as smileys and capitalisation;
- syntactical and lexical repetition;
- euphemisms;
- complex syntactical structures, and
- formal, sophisticated lexis.

I suggest that, by persistently using indexical resources in descriptions of their children, contributors to this thread position themselves in *gendered* and *classed* subject positions, within the discourses of 'gendered parenthood' and 'classed parenthood', respectively. I also suggest that, in the playful and humorous context of this thread, this self-positioning takes on an ironic and subversive quality. Thus, participants are able to both take up *and* resist the discourses outlined here, engaging in a discursive struggle to define their parental subjectivity in innovative ways.

I identify a discourse of 'commercialisation' by examining participants' transposition of the linguistic conventions of classified advertisements to this Mumsnet Talk thread. These linguistic conventions include:

- ellipsis;
- heavily modified nouns;
- descriptions and evaluations of children, and
- stock phrases.

By superimposing a commercial advertising frame on to descriptions of their children, participants position their children as commodities. My analysis draws particular attention to the linguistic resources contributors use to distance themselves from their children, such as ellipsis and evaluative descriptions, and also the avoidance of emphasis on personal relationships in the categorisation of children, for example through use of the article 'a'/ 'an'. I suggest in section 6.2.2 that the 'commercialisation' discourse merges with the other discourses identified here to produce the 'good mother' subject who, amongst other things, is positioned as the 'producer' of her children, and is thus responsible for their 'value'. I also, however, continually highlight the playful and ironic tone of the thread, which contributes to the subversion and resistance of the 'commercialisation' discourse, as well as the other discourses with which it merges in this context.

Finally, a discourse of 'child-centric motherhood', which is also pervasive in 'Your identity as a mother', is identified in this thread largely through scrutiny of participants' descriptions, and in particular their *evaluative* descriptions, of their children. Through these descriptions, I suggest, participants repeatedly position themselves in relation to their children: as I note in section 6.2.1, the reader's entire sense of who contributors *are* is gained from descriptions of their children, a point that is made explicit by Goblin's post. This discourse is subsumed within and reinforced by the 'gendered parenthood' discourse, making it difficult for participants to adopt any subject position other than as *female* parents: as 'mothers', and more specifically, as 'good mothers', a subject position created by the merging of all four discourses identified in this section.

6.3. Analysing discourses at play in an interactional sequence

The aim of this final part of my analysis is to more closely analyse the ways in which Mumsnet users are positioned by, and position themselves, in relation to the discourses identified in section 6.2.3. In order to conduct this in-depth analysis, I identify a sequence that is broadly representative of a thread that, as a whole, is relatively consistent in style and content (see section 4.4.4 for a detailed justification of my sequence selection).

Unlike the posts from 'Your identity as a mother' analysed in section 5.3, the sequence I present here (extract 6.8) does appear in a loosely chronological order (though posts by contributors who did not give their consent have been removed). Although most posts constitute isolated 'offers' that could be positioned anywhere in the thread, some interaction between contributors can be identified in this sequence, as where ████████ puts in a 'bid' for ████████ son (post 12) and ████████ requests ████████ teenagers (post 18). Such interactions make this sequence a fruitful site for analysing the ways in which participants position themselves in relation to each other, and in turn, in relation to discourses.

Extract 6.8. Sequence from 'Can we have a child exchange?'

████████

1. I have a truly delightful 13 year old boy available. He's clever, funny, helpful, affectionate and
2. considerate. However. He is currently teaching himself to play the harmonica. And he already
3. plays the didgeridoo and the ukelele. Sometimes at the same time.

████████

1. I've got a 4 year old boy that is a bit of a free spirit 🙂 he doesn't enjoy sitting still but if you
2. like being outside and running around a lot then he's the boy for you. He's also partial to cake
3. and will sometimes share.

4. Also got a newborn boy up for offers. He doesn't do much at the moment but he's lovely to
5. snuggle and smells nice 🙂

████████

1. Can I have the 13 year old boy? He sounds charming!

████████

1. 😂
2. I'll take any under 3, they're cute when they're under 3. Or over 11 so I can have a
3. conversation with them, or at least leave them to fart in their own rooms.

████████

1. I can offer a couple of teenagers.

2. On the plus side, they are very good at cooking for themselves, they don't wake at night (or in
3. the morning, or at lunchtime for that matter) and they could be useful for looking after young
4. children.

5. On the other hand, they generate a massive amount of laundry ~~which they can do themselves~~

6. ~~but I can't bear it when they do~~ and they are incredibly expensive.

7. And they take up so much space <eyes ds plus two friends whose feet seem to have taken
8. over the entire sitting room>

1. I'll take anything in return for my non sleeping, climbing 22mo [month old] with a snotty cold.
2. Recent hobbies include: Biting your head. Insisting you lay on the floor while he covers you in
3. Cushions then using your head as a trampoline. Taking off his nappy and doing a poo
4. somewhere random in the house, smearing it over himself and everything while saying cheerily
5. 'a mess' and 'i did'.

1. I'll take the teenagers, will they fit in our spare room? I'd be perfect, I'm up to speed on the
2. Hunger Games and stuff.

3. In exchange I'm offering a seven-month-old who'll only sleep on you - perfect for anyone who
4. misses baby snuggles! Will eat anything. Warning: Not suitably for anyone with back or neck
5. problems.

In section 6.2.2, I suggest that a range of discourses merge in this thread, and that together, they constitute the 'good mother' subject. Here, I focus on Mumsnet users' dual positioning, whereby they can be said to both approve these discourses, positioning themselves as 'good mothers', and at the same time to subvert them and resist being positioned in this way. The analysis of this section therefore has a particular focus on *subjectivity,* as well as its interrelation with knowledge and power (see section 2.4.1). My analysis continues to draw on the work of Ochs (1992) and Goffman (1974), as well as Davies and Harré's (1990) 'positioning theory' and Du Bois' (2007) 'stance triangle'.

My analysis of the first post of this sequence, post 7, yields similar results to my analysis of Microbat's post in section 6.2.2. In post 7, ██████ (the author) draws on all four of the discourses identified in section 6.2.3. She takes up a discourse of 'commercialisation' in the introduction of her '13 year old boy', keying the classified advertisement frame with a formulaic opening 'offer' statement ('I have', line 1), extended noun phrase ('a truly delightful 13 year old boy', line 1) and by listing her son's qualities ('clever, funny, helpful, affectionate and considerate', lines 1-2). In doing so, she positions her son as a commodity; the sum of her efforts as a parent. In turn, her positioning of her child as a product works to position *her* as producer of that commodity. Her use of the intensive adjective 'delightful' (line 1), prefaced by the intensive adverb 'truly', positively evaluates her child and also indexes femininity, reinforcing his position as a commodity and her position as a female parent. ██████ (The author's) positive evaluations also emphasise her own relationship with her child, positioning her as a subject of the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse. ██████ (The author's) reference to her son's ability to play three different instruments ('sometimes at the same time' – a comment, albeit presumably tongue-in-cheek, that alludes to a high level of proficiency) also indexes 'middle class' status. Learning to play an instrument to a high level, particularly instruments that are relatively exotic and rare such as 'the didgeridoo and the ukelele' (line 3), is likely to involve significant financial investments, and therefore points to ██████ (the author's)

access to economic and cultural resources. A final discourse of 'classed parenthood' can therefore be seen to intersect with 'gendered parenthood', 'commercialisation' and 'child-centric motherhood' in this post to produce the 'good mother' subject, who is 'feminine', middle class and relentlessly positive about her child. She is the producer of the child as a commodity and is positioned in relation to that child. The overall effect of this play with conventions and stereotypes, as emphasised in section 6.2.2, is one of humour and irony. As a result, ████████ (the author's) self-positioning in relation to these discourses and her positioning as a 'good mother' is not straightforward; she can be said to both approve and subvert the forms of knowledge offered by these discourses.

Contributors to this sequence can also be seen to adopt the collaborative style that is typical of the thread as a whole. For example, in post 13, ████████ (henceforth 'Roseberry') legitimates description of her son with the exclamation 'He sounds charming!' (line 1). Through this positive evaluation, Roseberry positively aligns with ████████ , approving ████████ positioning of her son as a valuable commodity, her self-positioning as a good mother and, in turn, the range of discourses that work to produce this subject position. Roseberry's alignment with ████████ and ████████ indeed most other contributors to the thread, can also be felt through her adoption of similar linguistic resources, namely indices of femininity such as the intensive adjectives 'charming' (post 12, line 1), 'lovely' (post 11, line 4) and the smiley 😊 (post 11, line 5), which all work to reinforce the evaluative message of her post. Through this affiliative double-voicing, contributors to this sequence can be said to constitute the 'good mother' subject in *collaboration,* as one voice, rather than many individual, separate voices. Collaboration has also been labelled a 'feminine' interactional style in a range of early gender and language research (see sections 6.2.1 and 3.2.1). Thus, contributors' collaborative construction of the 'good mother' subject through repetitive echoing of similar linguistic resources can also be read as an index of femininity that further works to constitute the feminine 'good mother' subject. As a collective alliance, contributors to this sequence can therefore be said to approve the discourses that merge to produce this subject position. Yet, as noted previously, participants at the same time distance themselves from the very subject position they take up, and resist the discourses that produce it, through humour and irony.

Roseberry's euphemistic description of her son as a 'free spirit' in post 11 (line 1) also works to build this sense of collective alliance between contributors to the thread. From a participant stance, I can interpret 'free spirit' to mean 'out of control', or something similar. This euphemistic expression, and similar examples across the thread such as Whispers' use of 'cheeky' (see section 6.2.2), avoids an explicitly negative evaluation of her child. By using this strategy, Roseberry indexes femininity,

maintains a hearably positive stance in relation to her child and positions him as a valuable commodity. But the winking smiley placed after this description, like the strikethrough text of Whispers' post, can be said to mark this expression quite explicitly as part of a performance of expected, or acceptable, behaviour. It suggests a shared knowingness and points to Roseberry's confidence that others will read a secondary, unspoken meaning behind this phrase. Going a step further, this euphemistic allusion points to a shared understanding of the ironic construction of the 'good mother' subject that takes place here. It is a moment at which participants' collusion in the constitution of the 'good mother' subject, in the simultaneous approval and resistance of the discourses that merge to produce this subject, becomes particularly apparent.

Post 18 is similar to post 7 in that it draws on all four of the discourses identified in section 6.2.3 in the simultaneous construction and resistance of the 'good mother' subject. Here, ████████ (the author) colludes in the keying of the classified advertisement frame, responding to ███████ offer of two teenagers before presenting her own child for 'exchange'. She continues to commodify ████████ teenagers by enquiring about their 'dimensions', asking 'will they fit in our spare room?' (line 1) and in turn commodifies her own 'seven-month-old', using some of the resources outlined in section 6.2.1, such as the impersonal labelling of her child using the indefinite article 'a' and the heavily modified noun phrase that follows: 'a seven-month-old who'll only sleep on you' (line 3).

Like ███████ , she offers a caveat; a 'reason for sale' in line 3. The negative implications of having a child 'who'll only sleep on you' will be apparent to most, and she alludes to one problem in her closing statement 'Warning: Not suitably (*sic*) for anyone with back or neck problems' (lines 4-5). Yet frames this trait in positive terms with the statement 'perfect for anyone who misses baby snuggles!' (lines 3-4). ████████ (The author's) avoidance of an unequivocally negative evaluation of her child, like Roseberry's in post 11 (see above), is consistent with the classified advertisement frame, and also maintains her self-positioning as a 'good mother', who positively evaluates her child and in turn is positively evaluated, as a 'good' mother. ████████ (The author) also takes up the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse through her positioning of herself as a passive participant in her interactions with her child. Like ███████ in post 66 of 'Your identity as a mother' (see section 5.2.3), she appears willing to suffer negative consequences in order to meet her child's needs. Her complaint about these negative consequences, thinly veiled by humour, suggests that she resists being positioned in this way. However, like ████████ , her acceptance of these consequences draws attention to the difficulty of escaping the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse.

Occasionally, contributors resist and subvert the discourses at work in this thread in more explicit ways. For example, in post 17, ████████ (the author's) use of the present participles 'biting', 'insisting', 'using', 'taking', 'doing', 'smearing' and 'saying' (lines 2-4), imply that her son is a

destructive and irrepressible force, whose actions are relentless and all-consuming. ████████ (The author's) use of bathos draws attention to the shocking nature of these actions (see my analysis of this post in section 6.2.1), but also frames her post as a humorous anecdote, mitigating her negativity to some extent by drawing attention to her playful, humorous keying of the classified advertisement frame. ████████ (The author's) exasperation, however, is only thinly masked by humour. Many of the processes she describes carry negative evaluations of her child, such as 'biting', which implies aggression and animalistic behaviour, 'insisting', which suggests that he is controlling and forceful, and 'smearing', which has negative connotations of irrevocable and far-reaching damage. These descriptions are devoid of the positive evaluations that characterise most posts to this thread, as well as the indices of femininity and class that tend to accompany them and invoke discourses of gendered or classed parenthood. In her descriptions of her child, ████████ (the author) can therefore be said to resist being positioned as a 'good mother', and to more explicitly resist the discourses that merge to produce this subject position than other contributors.

Although ████████ (the author) can be said, in some respects, to resist being positioned by the discourses identified in section 6.2.3, she nevertheless remains positioned by the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse that pervades both this thread and 'Your identity as a mother' (see chapter 5). She evaluates her child in exclusively negative terms, for example, which distances her from her son and thus demonstrates a resistance to being positioned in relation to him, yet still presents her child's needs and whims as coming before her own. By positioning herself as a passive participant in her interactions with her son, she appears willing to suffer the negative consequences of his actions: being bitten, jumped on and having to clean up faeces from her child and her house. Her resistant but resigned acceptance of her child's dominance in her life can be compared with that of ████████ (the author) in post 18, and to a lesser extent, ████████ (the author) in post 7 (see Appendix Y for further analysis to support this point). The way these participants present their own needs as secondary to their children's also echoes contributions to 'Your identity as a mother', such as ████████ statement 'I'm the least important person in my own life' and ████████ 'the children have had to occupy most of my energy' (see section 5.2.3). Together, the multiple ways in which the authors of these posts are positioned, particularly the way they both take up and resist discourses of gendered parenthood, draws attention to the difficulty of escaping the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse in particular, which often positions participants in relation to their children, even where they try to resist it.

One thing that is apparent from all posts to this sequence is that, just as contributors to this thread are rarely unequivocally negative about their children ████████ being an exception in this respect),

so, too, are they rarely unequivocally *positive.* This can be attributed, in part, to the conventions of the classified advertisement frame, within which contributors may offer a 'reason for sale', as ████████ (the author) does in the opening post. Most contributors adhere to this convention, with some explaining their reason for sale in detail, and a few (such as ████████) devoting their posts entirely to lengthy complaints about their children. ████████ (The author's) description of her 'teenagers' in post 14, for example, is largely negative, with even her hearably positive comments, such as 'they don't wake at night' (line 2) being modified by caveats: 'or in the morning, or at lunchtime for that matter' (lines 2-3). Similarly, the modal 'could', in her statement 'they *could* be useful for looking after young children' (lines 3-4, my emphasis), suggests that even this potentially useful attribute has uncertain value, or is unlikely to happen in practice. Complaints can also be heard in the 'double-speak' of post 18, in which ████████ (the author) frames the hearably negative attribute of a child 'only sleeping on you' in positive terms, or vice versa, as in post 7, where ████████ (the author) frames the hearably positive attribute of playing multiple instruments in negative terms (see Appendix Y for further analysis to support this point). Complaints like these run through the thread, serving to negatively evaluate and thereby distance participants from their children. Participants' mutual complaining also builds the aforementioned sense of collective alliance, creating positive alignment between contributors who share modes of describing their children. Participants' negative evaluations of their children also contribute to the subversive tone of the thread as a whole. Through these descriptions, children are positioned not just as commodities, but also as annoyances or inconveniences, from whom participants are distanced and removed. By positioning their children in this way, contributors can be said to resist being positioned as 'good mothers', who produce 'perfect' or 'successful' children and are positioned entirely in relation to those children.

Participants' complaints about their children can also be interpreted as *competitive* in nature, as suggested in the analysis of section 6.2.1. The authors of these posts can be said not only to compete over who has successfully produced desirable 'products' – who can legitimately position themselves as 'good mothers' – but also who has *not* successfully produced desirable products –who *resists* being positioned as a 'good mother'. This competitive element, I suggest in section 6.2.1, is consistent with the promotional genre of classified advertisements, but I also suggest that it can be seen as an index of masculinity. Further, competition seems to be intimately tied with collaboration in this context, where contributors build on the words of others, and often take their sentiments one step further. This intersubjective development of themes pushes the boundaries of what is 'acceptable' in this thread, with successive contributors' claims often becoming increasingly subversive and extreme. The competitive element of contributors' posts to this thread therefore has multiple possible implications.

6.4. Self-reflections

Just as, in section 5.4, I draw attention to my potentially problematic identification and categorisation of 'men', 'women', 'mothers' and 'fathers', I am again confronted with the difficulty of placing contributors in particular categories in my analysis of 'Can we have a child exchange?' For example, despite the fact that contributors do not tend to make any reference to their own gender, I refer to all participants as women and suggest that they position themselves both as *female* parents, and as 'good *mothers*'. Analysing the ways in which a group of anonymous contributors to an online forum position themselves, however, is likely to rely on some assumptions, and I would argue that in this case they are supported by convincing evidence. First, the title of the very site within which participants interact, 'Mumsnet', includes women and excludes men, making it very likely that contributors will identify themselves as women and as mothers. I also provide extensive evidence in this chapter that contributors repeatedly draw on resources that are indexical of femininity in descriptions of their children.

I also suggest in this chapter that participants adopt 'classed' subject positions, which is potentially even more problematic. Whilst there is an extensive body of literature around the theme of stereotypically gendered speech styles and the indexing of gender (see sections 3.2.1 and 3.2.4), there is little equivalent work exploring stereotypically 'classed' speech styles or the indexing of class. Added to this fact is my discomfort with the very term 'class' itself, which implies that people can be categorised into fixed, immovable 'types', such as 'upper class', 'middle class' and 'lower/working class' (see section 3.2.5). Further, these categories imply hierarchy: that 'upper' is somehow better than 'middle', for example. Labelling people according to class thus implies segregation, essentialism and elitism – all of which is inconsistent with the poststructuralist framework of this thesis. Yet, participants persistently adopt themes and linguistic resources that carry implications about their wealth, linguistic competence and cultural interests, which have all been tied to the concept of class (see section 3.2.5). My analysis of the way Mumsnet users draw on cultural, linguistic and economic resources that are indexical of class resolves these theoretical and analytical conflicts to some degree, because I focus not on what contributors *are,* but on how they use certain resources to position themselves in a particular way at a particular moment. In my analyses, I make the link between participants' use of these resources and their self-positioning as 'middle class' parents, but do not make the additional step to categorise participants as belonging to a particular classed group on the basis of these analyses.

6.5. Summary and conclusion

As with my analysis of 'Your identity as a mother' (see chapter 5), I take an inductive, emergent approach to the analysis of 'Can we have a child exchange?' Both analyses deploy similar strategies in my initial explorations of the threads, focusing on knowledge, power and subjectivity (see section 2.4.1) and drawing on the work of Davies and Harré (1990) and Du Bois (2007) to investigate Mumsnet users' discursive positioning. The analysis detailed in this chapter, however, also draws on the work of Ochs (1992) and Goffman (1974) in order to conceptualise the relationships between particular linguistic resources and wider social constructs and cultural assumptions.

Through the analyses presented in this chapter, I identify four discourses at play in 'Can we have a child exchange?':

- commercialisation;
- gendered parenthood;
- classed parenthood, and
- child-centric motherhood.

My analyses lead me to suggest that these discourses operate almost exclusively in combination in the context of this thread, merging to produce what I call the 'good mother', a classed, gendered subject who is the 'producer' of children, and is positioned entirely in relation to children. These interdiscursive relations are a prominent feature of the analyses presented in this chapter, and they will be revisited in the discussion chapter that follows.

What becomes clear from the cumulative analyses of this chapter is that participants' posts often convey multiple layers of meaning. The most apparent and persistent double-meaning in the thread relates to contributors' keying of the classified advertisement frame, within which they present their children as commodities of no particular consequence, that are freely available for sale or exchange. Yet participants' posts are not likely to be mistaken for genuine pleas to exchange their children. Rather, by keying the classified advertisement frame, they create a playful, humorous thread in which they actually both distance themselves from *and* draw attention to their love and devotion for their children. The ways in which participants position themselves within this playful context are therefore complex and multiple. The playful, ironic tone of the thread can be said to imply that the construction of motherhood itself is a 'game', or a 'performance', in which certain rules should be upheld – to be 'feminine' and 'middle class'; to be responsible for the 'value' of their children as commodities, and, ultimately, to be positioned and evaluated in relation to their children. By positioning themselves as 'good mothers' in a playful and humorous context, participants draw

attention to and thereby critique the rules of this 'game', the lines in the sand around which this subjectivity is constructed and the demands that are placed upon them, as 'good mothers'.

The subtleties of participants' self-positioning highlight the power struggles surrounding the discourses that work to fix their subjectivity. By positioning themselves as 'good mothers', they simultaneously approve, but also subvert and mock this subject position, drawing attention to its falseness. Thus, they are not powerlessly fixed as 'good mothers', always positioned and evaluated in relation to children, and as 'producers' of children, but are able to assert power and control of their own subjectivity through play, subversion and humour. This point, together with other key insights from the analysis set out here and in chapter 5, will be further developed and explored in the discussion chapter that follows.

Chapter 7. Discussion

7.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I explore the implications of the analyses and findings set out in chapters 5 and 6 in relation to each of the research questions identified in section 4.5:

1. What discourses are at play, and how are they significant, in Mumsnet interactions?
2. Are Mumsnet users positioned as gendered parental subjects? If so, how?
3. How do Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to discourses, and does Mumsnet Talk offer particular resources that facilitate or constrain its users' opportunities to construct transformative discursive positions?
4. What methods are effective for the identification and analysis of discourses in Mumsnet Talk?

I also show how my interpretations relate to existing knowledge, drawing my analysis together with the theory, methods and relevant literature explored across this thesis. Self-reflexivity is a key element of this discussion throughout, as I explore the factors that lead me to particular interpretations and begin to consider the limitations of both my discussion and this thesis as a whole. I explore my responses to each research question separately, between sections 7.2 and 7.5. This methodical approach aims to provide clarity and coherence, although it also reduces opportunities to interpret my findings in a holistic way. I therefore use my conclusion (section 7.6) to consider whether and how some of the insights explored in each section overlap and merge.

7.2.   What discourses are at play, and how are they significant, in Mumsnet interactions?

Eight discourses are identified through the analyses set out in chapters 5 and 6:

1. gendered parenthood;
2. child-centric motherhood;
3. mother as main parent;
4. absent fathers;
5. equal parenting;
6. individuality;
7. classed parenthood, and
8. commercialisation.

In this section, I review each of these discourses, briefly considering both how they relate to discourses identified by other scholars working in relevant fields, how they relate to one another and their significance for both my research and the wider sociolinguistic context, particularly the field of gender and language. This brief review contextualises the more detailed discussions that follow from section 7.3 to 7.6.

The discourse of 'gendered parenthood' is identified as an overarching discourse that incorporates several other discourses (see section 5.2.3). I would also suggest here that the discourse of 'gendered parenthood' converges with an overarching discourse of gender differentiation, a pervasive, dominant discourse that frequently interacts with other discourses (Baxter, 2003; see section 1.3.2). The discourses of 'child-centric motherhood', 'mother as main parent' and 'absent fathers' are therefore all discourses of 'gendered parenthood', but also, in more general terms, discourses of gender differentiation. They work to fix individuals in binary gendered subject positions, and therefore restrict their access to a range of subject positions. I find that Mumsnet users position male and female parents as distinct and separate, even where they resist being positioned by more specific discourses of 'gendered parenthood' such as 'child-centric motherhood' and 'mother as main parent'. I therefore suggest that 'gendered parenthood' is a particularly dominant, pervasive discourse in this context and it is difficult for Mumsnet users to completely escape.

'Child-centric motherhood' is a discourse of 'gendered parenthood' that dominates both of the threads analysed in this thesis. In 'Your identity as a mother', this discourse is manifested partly in participants' qualification and evaluation of the subject position 'mum/mother'. In *both* threads, it is further realised through participants' positioning of themselves and/or other women in relation to their children. My identification of this discourse echoes the emphasis in much sociological literature upon child-centred motherhood (see section 3.3). Wall (2013), for example, names a discourse of 'intensive child-centred motherhood' in Canadian parenting magazines and Lawler (2000) points to the centrality of children and children's needs within discourses of motherhood. My findings support the claims of scholars such as Johnston and Swanson (2006, 2007) and Wall (2010, 2013) that a model of 'intensive mothering' (Hays, 1996), which among other things is child-centred, placing mothers' needs below children's, persists for many women who are parents in western society. My analysis adds to and reinforces these claims by showing *how* women can be positioned in this way through their everyday digital interactions. The prevalence of this discourse, and the way it pervades contributors' posts even where they seem to resist it, and/or draw on competing discourses (see sections 5.2.3 and 5.3), leads me to suggest that 'child-centric motherhood' is a dominant discourse in the context of the Mumsnet Talk threads I analyse.

The discourse I name 'mother as main parent' also echoes a key theme of Hays' (1996) 'intensive mothering' model, whereby women are positioned as 'natural' carers, and therefore the parent most needed by their children (see section 3.3). My identification of this discourse supports the claims of scholars such as Gillies (2007) and Wall (2013) that mothers and fathers continue to be

positioned in unequal roles in contemporary western contexts. The dominance of the 'mother as main parent' discourse, as with 'child-centric motherhood', can also be evidenced by pointing to moments at which contributors attempt to resist being positioned as 'main parents', yet are unable to completely escape this discourse (see section 5.2.2).

The 'mother as main parent' discourse can also be compared with the 'combination' discourse 'Part-time father/ Mother as main parent' identified by Sunderland (2000). Like Sunderland (2000), I identify the 'mother as main parent' discourse, which positions female subjects, alongside a discourse that positions male subjects. I suggest that the marginalisation of fathers in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread creates a very powerful, pervasive divide between 'present' mothers and 'absent' fathers and that both 'mother as main parent' and 'absent fathers' are dominant discourses in this context. They work to reinforce one another, because the exclusion of fathers works to position mothers as the main, if not sole, carers for their children, which in turn positions men as irrelevant and marginalised in the family context. Although these discourses can work to restrict Mumsnet users' access to a range of subject positions, at times placing users such as (see section 5.2.3) in positions of powerlessness, the exclusion of men in these threads can also be said to offer Mumsnet users relatively *powerful* positions, whereby they have access to a range of parental subject positions, such as main parent and child-centred parent, that are difficult for male parents to access.

Unlike Sunderland (2000), I name 'mother as main parent' and 'absent fathers' as separate discourses, even though I analyse them almost exclusively in combination and suggest that they repeatedly merge in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread. I do this for two reasons. First, I would suggest that identifying what are potentially two discourses as one 'combination' discourse restricts possibilities for analysing the ways in which they relate to other discourses. There are points in my analysis of 'Your identity as a mother', for example, at which the 'mother as main parent' discourse is identified through participants' positioning of very much *present* fathers (see sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3). It would be difficult to argue that 'mother as main parent' and 'absent fathers' operate in combination at these moments. Second, in an analysis that focuses almost entirely on the ways of being that are available to women, to conjoin these discourses would, I believe, work to further marginalise and restrict my analysis of the ways of being that are available to men (see section 5.4). Thus, in my analysis of 'absent fathers', the focus is briefly shifted from an analysis of the ways in which mothers are fixed in a care-giving subjectivity, to a focus on the ways in which male or any other carers are *excluded* from this subjectivity. This shift shows that the 'absent fathers' discourse is relevant in its own right, not just in terms of what it reveals about the positioning of mothers. With

this in mind, I recognise that my lack of attention to the ways in which men are positioned by discourses in Mumsnet Talk is both a limitation of this thesis and a fruitful area for further research.

The discourses that have been reviewed so far are all dominant in the threads analysed here and all gendered. The implications of this finding will be discussed further in section 7.3. The discourses that remain: 'equal parenting', 'individuality', 'classed parenthood' and 'commercialisation', are arguably not gendered. However, gender is very much foregrounded in the construction of the 'equal parenting' and 'individuality' discourses in 'Your identity as a mother', where non-gendered subject positions such as 'parent' or 'me' are frequently taken up in opposition to the gendered subject position 'mother'. In this thread, 'equal parenting' and 'individuality' generally compete with and offer sites for the resistance and negotiation of gendered discourses: namely, 'mother as main parent', 'gendered parenthood' and 'child-centric motherhood'. However, the analyses of chapter 5 also shows that there are moments at which discourses of 'equal parenting' and 'individuality' do not compete, but merge and combine with discourses of 'gendered parenthood'. For example, in section 5.2.2, I show that some participants attempt to position parents within discourses of *both* 'gendered parenthood' *and* 'equal parenting'' - as 'mothers' and 'fathers' who are gendered but equal subjects. Furthermore, I show in section 5.2.1 that participants often identify themselves both as individuals *and* as 'mums'. In doing so, they resist being positioned by a discourse of 'child-centric motherhood', *exclusively* in relation to their children, but again maintain their self-positioning within a wider discourse of 'gendered parenthood'. These findings again point to the dominance of the overarching discourse of 'gendered parenthood': even where my participants resist gendered subject positions, they still tend to draw on discourses of 'gendered parenthood' in order to do so.

The final two discourses identified in this study are 'classed parenthood' and 'commercialisation' (see chapter 6). These discourses do not tend to compete with gendered discourses in the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread, unlike 'individuality' and 'equal parenting' in 'Your identity as a mother'. However, they *are* interdiscursively linked with discourses of 'gendered parenthood' throughout this thread, as I show through my analysis of the way several discourses merge to constitute the 'good mother' subject (sections 6.2.2 and 6.3). Several significant insights emerge from this analysis. First, it shows that discourses of 'gendered parenthood' can become more powerful when they draw in and merge with other discourses, constituting new means by which women, as 'mothers', can be positioned in relation to children, in exclusively caring subject positions. It is particularly striking that a discourse of 'commercialisation' should work so effectively and powerfully with other discourses that are more clearly connected to gender and parenthood to produce a subjectivity that sustains gender inequalities, positioning women as primarily responsible

and accountable for their children as outcomes or commodities. My analysis echoes Wall's (2013) finding that, in Canadian parentcraft texts, several discourses combine in a way that makes it difficult for women, as mothers, to legitimise their own needs (see section 3.3), and affirms Baxter's (2003) claim that discourses of gender differentiation interact with other discourses to 'fix' meanings and subjectivity. Through interdiscursivity, discourses become more specialised and also more powerful, because it becomes increasingly difficult to untangle the web of intersecting discourses that merge to produce particular subject positions. The 'good mother' is identified as a subject position that is produced through such interdiscursive relations.

The analysis of chapter 6 also supports the claim in much sociological literature that cultural associations between 'good' mothering and 'middle class' values persist (see section 3.3); they can be shown to do so in the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread, at least. It is worthy of note that 'classed parenthood' emerges as a significant discourse in a study that is positioned primarily within the field of gender and language. My analysis supports an argument that has been present in gender and language research for some time (see Bing and Bergvall, 1996; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992), and has recently been re-emphasised by Levon (2015): that gender is fruitfully studied alongside and together with intersecting socio-cultural classifications (see section 3.2.5). Intersections of gender and class, like constructions of men and fathers, occupy limited analytical space in this thesis, but I identify such intersections as an important area for future research.

7.3.   Are Mumsnet users positioned as gendered parental subjects? If so, how?

The pervasiveness of the gendered discourses reviewed in section 7.2, especially their persistence at moments where participants work to challenge them, leads me to suggest that Mumsnet users *are* persistently positioned as gendered parental subjects in the Mumsnet Talk interactions analysed here.

The analyses of chapters 5 and 6 show *how* discourses of 'gendered parenthood' work to persistently position Mumsnet users as gendered parental subjects. For example, in chapter 5, categorisation emerges as a mechanism by which discourses of 'gendered parenthood' operate in the 'Your identity as a mother' thread. My analysis of this thread shows that contributors frequently position themselves and others using the category 'mother' and its variants, which directly indexes gender, positioning them as *female* parents. The very title of this thread, and indeed, the title of the Mumsnet website itself (see section 1.2), also deploys the category 'mum/mother'. This not only excludes men, as I point out in section 5.2.2, but also limits the subject positions available to contributors. This focus on female parents, which goes hand in hand with the *absence* of visible representations of male parents, can be said to legitimise the overarching discourse of 'gendered

parenthood', reinforcing a dichotomous gender divide between 'male' and 'female' parental subject positions. It also legitimises 'mother' as the obvious, common sense category available to Mumsnet users, and indirectly positions them within the 'mother as main parent' discourse.

In my analysis of 'Can we have a child exchange?' (chapter 6), by contrast, I find very few direct indices of gender through categories or other naming devices. Yet my analysis suggests that participants are again persistently positioned as female parents in this thread. They are positioned in this way not through directly indexical categories such as 'mother', but through indirect indices of gender (Ochs, 1992); through allusion to cultural stereotypes about 'feminine' interactional styles (see section 3.2.4). I suggest in sections 6.2 and 6.3 that, by drawing on resources that are indexical of femininity in descriptions of their children, contributors to 'Can we have a child exchange?' position themselves within a discourse of 'gendered parenthood', as 'mothers'. I suggest, further, that this dominant discourse merges with discourses of 'classed parenthood', 'child-centric motherhood' and 'commercialisation' to constitute the 'good mother' subject. The analyses of sections 6.2 and 6.3 show that, although contributors to 'Can we have a child exchange?' resist and subvert this subject position, they do so almost exclusively *through* their adoption of the 'good mother' subject position itself. This further points to the dominance of discourses of 'gendered parenthood'; the difficulty for Mumsnet users to escape these discourses and the gendered parental subject positions they produce.

Where 'gendered parenthood' merges with and takes shape in discourses such as 'child-centric motherhood', 'classed parenthood' and 'commercialisation', gendered parental subject positions are defined in increasingly specific and restrictive ways. For example, the 'good mother' of 'Can we have a child exchange?' is constituted through the interdiscursive relation of all four of these discourses. In sections 5.2.1 and 5.3, I show how some participants position themselves within a discourse of both 'gendered parenthood' and 'child-centric motherhood', as 'mothers' whose subjectivity is completely centred around their relation to children. In sections 5.2.2 and 5.2.3, I show how some participants position themselves within the 'gendered parenthood' and 'mother as main parent' discourses through oppositional positioning and differentiation of mothers and fathers. These multiple, interdiscursive relations create a powerful discursive force surrounding the subject position 'mum', which becomes entwined with exclusively care-giving, child-centric subject positions. It is not surprising, then, that some contributors are vehemently resistant to being positioned as 'mums'. Contributors such as ████████ (see section 5.2.1) and ████████ (see section 5.2.3) are not just resisting being categorised as gendered subjects, or as parents, but resisting a subject position that can work to fix them in restrictive ways, potentially to the exclusion of other ways of being.

There are moments, particularly in 'Your identity as a mother', at which Mumsnet users work to position themselves outside of discourses of 'gendered parenthood'. I suggest in sections 5.2 and 7.1, for example, that when participants take up the subject positions 'parent' or 'me', they position themselves within competing discourses of 'equal parenting' and 'individuality', respectively. The disavowal of the category 'mother' by some contributors to 'Your identity as a mother' recalls Lawler's (2000) finding that her participants often work to assert a sense of self that escapes the subject position 'mother' (see section 3.3). Yet neither Lawler's (2000) participants, nor my own, are able to completely escape this subject position or the discourses that constitute it. I show time and again, in the analysis of Chapter 5, that where contributors to 'Your identity as a mother' position themselves as individuals or as equal parents, they also position themselves as mothers. Some resist being positioned exclusively as mothers but embrace being partially positioned in this way. Others resist being positioned as the 'main parent', but the language they use to position themselves in relation to fathers nevertheless fixes them in this subjectivity. Lawler's (2000: 167) interpretation of such apparently contradictory states is that, for her participants, subjectivity is partially, but *not wholly* determined by discourses of motherhood; that they are able to write their own 'story of motherhood', 'albeit in partial and fragmented ways'. To a degree, I would suggest that Lawler's conclusions are also relevant here. Mumsnet users' multiple, shifting and, at times, apparently contradictory self-positioning is indicative of a process of negotiation – an attempt to position themselves on their own terms. But I would also emphasise, and more so than Lawler, the force and persistence of dominant discourses of 'gendered parenthood' in my participants' interactions. I show that discourses of 'gendered parenthood' persistently work to differentiate parental subject positions according to gender, to delimit the subject positions 'mother' and 'father'. I would therefore argue that gender is always present to some degree in constructions of parenthood in the threads I analyse in this thesis; that my participants are *always* positioned as gendered parental subjects.

This discussion leads me to suggest that more attention needs to be paid to language, gender and *parenthood* within the sociolinguistic discipline, in order to further challenge and destabilise the persistence of fixed, restrictive subject positions for men and women and to open up new ways of being that are not constrained by discourses of gender differentiation. This is a challenge that is particularly relevant for the field of gender and language. Gender and language researchers have done much to challenge the gender dichotomy, drawing attention to the potential fluidity, dynamism and multiplicity of gendered constructs and to the role of language in the constitution of gendered subjectivity. Scholars in this field are therefore well positioned to interrogate and unpack

how these dichotomies persist in the more specific context of parenthood, and to identify multiple and alternative ways of expressing the relation between language, gender and parenthood.

7.4. How do Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to discourses, and does Mumsnet Talk offer particular resources that facilitate or constrain its users' opportunities to construct transformative discursive positions?

Throughout my analyses and discussion, I have highlighted the difficulty for Mumsnet users to position themselves outside of discourses of 'gendered parenthood', emphasising the way these discourses can work to fix them in gendered subject positions and restrict their access to other subject positions. That is not to say, however, that the participants of this study do not work to negotiate, resist and position themselves outside of these discourses. In section 7.3, I discuss some of the ways in which Mumsnet users *are positioned* in relation to discourses of 'gendered parenthood'. In this section, I pay particular attention to my findings about how Mumsnet users work to *position themselves* in relation to the range of discourses that are identified and analysed in chapters 5 and 6 and consider whether they are able to construct transformative discursive positions in this digital context.

The analyses of chapter 5, particularly sections 5.2.3 and 5.3, focus in on the way Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to discourses through interaction with, reference to and alignment with others. I suggest in section 5.3, for example, that contributors to a 'significant moment' in 'Your identity as a mother' work to construct and distance themselves from a group that come to represent the 'child-centric motherhood' discourse. In section 5.2.3, I suggest that (the author) achieves a similar effect with a single individual, her husband. In these examples, Mumsnet users can be seen to position themselves in opposition with the dominant discourse of 'child-centric motherhood', by focusing in on a specific individual or group who voices this discourse. By doing so, they make a somewhat abstract force personal and tangible: it is difficult to contest dominant discourses, as my analysis has shown, but it is much easier to debate with, disparage or support a specific individual or group of individuals. I show in these sections that participants make particular use of evaluative resources such as categories, double-voiced discourse and qualifiers such as 'good' or 'neglectful' in order to position themselves in negative alignment with others who come to represent a particular discourse. Participants can also be seen to use these resources to *positively* align with others, and thus *approve* the discourse they come to represent, as I suggest ▬▬▬▬ (the author) does with the 'devoted mother' of her post (see section 5.3).

The analysis of chapter 6 highlights another set of resources deployed by Mumsnet users to position themselves in relation to discourses. Here I suggest that contributors to 'Can we have a child

exchange?' use indexical resources, drawing on cultural assumptions relating to class and gender to position themselves as both 'middle class' and 'feminine' parents; as subjects of the discourses of 'classed parenthood' and 'gendered parenthood'. Just as gender and language scholars such as Barrett (1998) and Holmes (2006) have shown that individuals can use indexical resources to draw attention to and problematise stereotypical assumptions (see section 3.2.4), I suggest here that contributors to 'Can we have a child exchange?' use these resources to draw attention to and critique some of the gendered assumptions surrounding motherhood.

Participants' keying of the classified advertisement frame is identified as a significant resource by which Mumsnet users achieve this quite complex and nuanced self-positioning. By keying this frame, participants create a playful tone; a sense that what is said is not what is meant (see section 6.2). The result is ostensibly humorous, but this strategy also creates a sense of irony and critique that underlines the whole thread. Coloured by this pervasive tone of irony, Mumsnet users' self-positioning as the 'good mother' takes on a complex character. It becomes difficult to differentiate 'genuine' subject positioning as the devoted maternal subject from ironic parody and critique of it. Multiple interpretations of Mumsnet users' words are made possible and their discursive positioning is obscured, made deniable and negotiable. The way contributors construct and take up this subject position can therefore be seen as both normative *and* transformative. Taking up the subversive position as producers of children as commodities is a particularly effective way of highlighting and critiquing the demands that are placed upon them as 'good mothers', such as being entirely responsible for children as 'outcomes'.

The analyses of chapter 6 lead me to suggest that humour and play are important resources for Mumsnet users, allowing them to construct transformative discursive positions in a way that is acceptable and ultimately deniable. Play and humour are facilitated, at least in part, by the potential for anonymity in this digital context, which can be said to allow individuals to move beyond socio-cultural expectations and constraints (see section 3.4.2). It may also be facilitated by Mumsnet users' shared identification and engagement with the forum. A shared sense of belonging, history and mutual understanding may allow users to engage in spontaneous, subversive humour and play without fear that it will be misconstrued, or taken too seriously. These affordances may also allow Mumsnet users to share frank and intimate portrayals of their lives and to express their dissatisfaction and frustration with the ways in which they are positioned by dominant discourses of 'gendered parenthood' in more explicit ways. Participants such as ████████ (see section 6.3) and ████████ (see section 5.2.3) can be seen to do just that in the threads analysed here. Consequently, these participants open up a space for the construction of transformative discursive positions such as the 'equal parent' and the 'individual', which contribute to the gradual erosion of dominant

discourses such as 'child-centric motherhood'.

An important point that emerges from the analyses of sections 5.3 and 6.3 in particular is that Mumsnet users' self-positioning in relation to discourses is often achieved jointly and collaboratively. By using collaborative strategies, participants are able to position themselves as members of a group who work together in the construction of meaning, who are on the same 'side'. Such collaborative positioning is achieved through, for example, shared use of digital resources (such as acronyms, smileys and strikethrough text), but also through affiliative double-voicing (see section 4.4.3), shared humour and joint constructions of self and other. These resources provide the means by which Mumsnet users can position both themselves and each other as part of a collective alliance. This collective alliance is a powerful resource in itself; as I suggest in both chapters 5 and 6, participants frequently draw on the discursive force of the Mumsnet community in their efforts to negotiate, resist or subvert dominant discourses of 'gendered parenthood'. When they adopt a *collective* position, Mumsnet users' voices can become powerful in this local context.

In addition, belonging to and/or aligning with the Mumsnet community can be seen to *constrain* participants' access to a range of discursive positions. In sections 5.2.2 and 7.2, for example, I point out that both the title of the whole website, and the title and opening post to 'Your identity as a mother', position readers as female parents: as 'mums' or 'mothers', thus constraining the parameters for appropriate participation and excluding potential contributors who do not identify themselves in this way. In 'Can we have a child exchange?', too, constraints are imposed on Mumsnet users. The creator of this thread, for example, introduces a format from which other contributors very rarely depart. The four discourses identified in this thread pervade almost every post, and most contributors negotiate these discourses using a similar set of resources, following ██████████ precedent. The interaction that ensues is very powerful in terms of its humour, irony and underlying critique but it allows little space for diverse voices to be heard, or for participants to adopt subject positions that completely escape the 'good mother'. I suggest above (and in section 3.4.2) that play can be seen to allow individuals to move beyond socio-cultural expectations and constraints; that multiple realities are made possible by play. However, like other scholars who have explored the way individuals orient to gender norms in online interactions (Gong, 2016; Hall et al., 2012; Milani, 2013; see section 3.4.2), I find that contributors to this thread adopt a set of subject positions that are very much in line with socio-cultural expectations. The way they take up these subject positions can be seen to critique, but also to legitimise dominant discourses of 'gendered parenthood'.

My analyses show how discursive positioning in Mumsnet Talk is achieved through interaction and intersubjectivity. I have suggested in this section that intersubjective positioning and alignment can be a force for reinforcing the status quo or a force for disruption and change. For example, it can compel Mumsnet users to take up dominant discourses, as where the subject position 'mother' prevails as a common sense category within the site (see sections 5.2.2 and 7.3), or it can be used to draw others in to the negotiation of resistant and transformative subject positions. Through intersubjective alignment, participants can position themselves as powerful in a local context, but at the same time it may suppress opportunities for diverse voices to be heard.

I suggest in section 3.4.2 that it is not helpful or accurate to conceptualise online spaces as *either* sites for the resistance and subversion, *or* the approval and perpetuation of dominant discourses, 'common sense' assumptions or stereotypes. My analyses support the point that research conducted in online contexts should be sensitive to the multiple ways in which individuals can position themselves, or be positioned, and to the affordances, constraints and opportunities offered by particular internet sites and by digital technologies more generally. Close attention to these affordances has been a key part of my analysis, and has contributed to a better understanding of *how* discursive mechanisms operate, how meanings are fixed, and how they can be negotiated.

7.5. What methods are effective for the identification and analysis of discourses in Mumsnet Talk?

In this section, I identify my approach to the identification and analysis of discourses in Mumsnet Talk as a new framework for the analysis of gender, or other socio-cultural constructs, in digital contexts. I describe this as a discursive-digital approach and it has three key elements: a grounded, inductive approach, microlinguistic analysis and discourse theory (see sections 4.2 and 4.3). Each of these elements has contributed to the effective identification and analysis of discourses in Mumsnet Talk, and in turn, to my central consideration of the ways of being that are available to Mumsnet users through their digital interactions in this context.

The 'grounded' element of my analysis draws influence from the established qualitative tradition of grounded theory (see section 4.2.2). This element has two key facets:

- Coding and categorisation (thematic and linguistic), and
- Concurrent identification and analysis of discourses through microlinguistic analysis.

The first stage of my study, data construction (see section 4.3), is significantly influenced by grounded theory. Although, as my study develops, I move beyond the analytical tools of a traditional grounded theory, the principles of flexibility and emergence remain central to my identification and

analysis of discourses throughout the second stage of my research. My grounded, inductive approach means that discourses are not taken as a 'given' in my analysis, but are identified *through* my analysis, in line with Sunderland's (2000) approach (see section 2.4.3 and 4.4). This grounded element is supported by a self-reflexive stance, whereby I acknowledge and critically examine my own position and the values and perspectives I bring to my research (see Charmaz, 2008; J. Mason, 2002; section 4.4.2).

In section 2.3.2, I argue that discourses can be effectively identified and evidenced through close scrutiny of language, as it is through language that discourses operate. Furthermore, I suggest in section 3.3 that it is my close attention to the role of language in discursive struggles around constructions of motherhood that distinguishes this study from the wealth of motherhood studies in the sociological discipline. It is therefore fitting that the second element of my discursive-digital approach is 'microlinguistic analysis'. In keeping with the work of prominent scholars in the discipline of Discourse Studies (see section 2.3.2), my discursive-digital approach does not prescribe specific, definitive tools for the identification and analysis of discourses. Rather, it endorses a grounded, inductive approach to microlinguistic analysis, so that the analytical tools I adopt and the particular linguistic features upon which I focus are influenced by the context of my study, particularly my research aims and questions, and by the nature of the threads I analyse. For example, I draw on theories of positioning, stance and intersubjectivity throughout this thesis, most notably the work of Davies and Harré (1990) and Du Bois (2007), because they are particularly appropriate for an analysis of the way individuals position themselves, in relation to others, through interaction (see section 1.3.3). Further, the methods I utilise in my analyses of two contrasting threads are adapted for each context. In my identification and analysis of discourses in 'Can we have a child exchange?', for example, I draw on Ochs' (1992) theory of indexicality (see sections 3.4.2 and 4.4.1) to analyse the way Mumsnet users position themselves as particular types of subjects by using indexical resources. Finally, the nature of my research site means that my participants are able to draw on a range of resources that are made available in the digital context, such as images and strikethrough text. These features are incorporated into my microlinguistic analysis.

The final element of my discursive-digital approach is my commitment to poststructuralist theory, particularly Foucault's (1972, 1978) concept of 'discourses' (see section 2.4), and feminist poststructuralist approaches that focus on gender, power and subjectivity (Baxter, 2003; Weedon, 1997; see section 2.3). This theoretical element anchors my analysis, drawing it back time and again to the central aim of exploring the discursive positions that are available to, and negotiated by, users of Mumsnet Talk. I point out in sections 2.4.3 and 3.3 that there are many parallels and distinctions

to be made between the approach taken in this thesis and the work of Sunderland (2000) in particular. Sunderland (2000) also works to identify and analyse discourses of fatherhood and motherhood in texts related to the theme of parenting through a grounded and linguistic approach. However, I suggest in section 2.4.3 that her analysis is limited by a lack of theorisation around the central nexus of discourse: knowledge, power and subjectivity. The final element of my approach builds on the work of Sunderland (2000) by grounding my identification and analysis of discourses more firmly in feminist poststructuralist discourse theory.

My attention to discourse theory affects both *what* I choose to analyse and *how* I analyse it. For example, my selection of specific posts and sequences from 'Your identity as a mother' in sections 5.2.3 and 5.3 is informed by my sense of what discourses are and how they operate. Because discourses do not exist in isolation and are not fixed (see section 2.4.2), I focus in on moments at which (potential) discourses seem to converge and interrelate and rarely analyse discourses in isolation. For example, in section 6.3, I look at how contributors to 'Can we have a child exchange?' draw on several merging discourses in their construction of the 'good mother' subject. Because discourses inscribe power relations (see section 2.4.1), I also focus on moments at which (potential) discourses seem to *compete*. For example, in section 5.3 I look at how contributors to 'Your identity as a mother' position themselves as subjects of one discourse (such as 'individuality') in order to resist another, competing discourse (such as 'child-centric motherhood'). The microlinguistic and theoretical elements of my approach converge in my analysis of the linguistic means by which participants position themselves, or are positioned, in relation to discourses. For example, participants' use of pronouns and categories features heavily in the analyses of sections 5.2. and 5.3, and their use of indirect indexical resources is significant in the analysis of sections 6.2 and 6.3. My focus on knowledge, power and subjectivity leads me to analyse these linguistic features as resources participants draw upon in order to position themselves as subjects of discourses, and/or as mechanisms by which discourses can be seen to position Mumsnet users in particular subject positions.

My discursive-digital approach addresses a number of limitations identified in previous Sociological and Sociolinguistic studies of motherhood (see section 3.3). It promotes clear explication of the means by which discourses are identified, close attention to the role language plays in discursive struggles and is firmly rooted in poststructuralist theory. It leads to the confident identification and sensitive analysis of discourses as they emerge *through* the text and are evidenced *in* the text. The flexibility of this discursive-digital approach makes it particularly effective and appropriate for the identification and analysis of discourses in busy, relatively unregulated digital contexts such as

Mumsnet Talk, which provide a space for multiple voices and perspectives to be heard. My approach may therefore be of significance and value to scholars of gender and language and other sociolinguistic fields who wish to take their studies into interactive digital contexts, or include such contexts in multi-sited studies. It is also valuable for scholars whose work is primarily focused on the analysis of interactive digital contexts, who wish to take a more theoretical and/or linguistic approach to their analyses. Overall, however, I believe that the flexibility of my discursive-digital approach makes it effective and appropriate for the identification and analysis of discourses in any text, not just those produced in a digital context.

7.6.   Summary and conclusion

An insight that cross-cuts nearly all of my research questions is that discourses of 'gendered parenthood', which I also identify as discourses of gender differentiation (Baxter, 2003), dominate both of the threads analysed in this thesis. My analyses show how discourses of 'gendered parenthood' frequently interact and merge with other discourses in this context to produce and sustain unequal gender relations and fix individuals in restrictive parental subject positions. Through such interdiscursivity, I suggest that dominant discourses can become even more powerful and specialised, drawing a range of forces in to the constitution of a single, dominant, subject position such as the 'good mother' of 'Can we have a child exchange?' These insights lead me to suggest that any appreciation of the ways in which inequalities within gender relations are produced must necessarily take account of a range of factors, such as classed relations, because they are so often produced in combination. Such intersectional analyses have the potential to move research in the field of gender and language, as well as the sociolinguistic discipline more widely, forward (see section 3.2.5). This is because intersectional analyses can more effectively take account of and highlight the way discourses can merge and interrelate in complex and multiple ways to restrict individuals' access to a range of subject positions.

My analyses also reveal that there are moments in the Mumsnet threads at which contributors work to negotiate or resist discourses of 'gendered parenthood'. I show that competing discourses, such as 'equal parenting' and 'individuality', can offer sites for such negotiation and resistance. By positioning themselves in relation to these discourses, for example as a 'parent', or as 'me', Mumsnet users at times position themselves in ways that are potentially transformative, contributing to the gradual erosion of pervasive, overarching discourses of 'gendered parenthood' (see section 7.4). I also show that Mumsnet users are able to draw on a range of resources, such as evaluation, double-voicing and keying, to negotiate discourses of 'gendered parenthood' in 'creative and subversive' ways (Lawler, 2000: 167). In section 7.4, I suggest that the particular affordances of

the Mumsnet forum itself, such as anonymity and access to a community of members, offer its users resources for the negotiation of new and transformative subject positions. This finding supports the implication in much parenthood and the internet research that online spaces can be fruitful sites for the resistance and subversion of dominant cultural norms. More specifically, it supports Pedersen and Smithson's (2013: 105) claim that 'Mumsnet provides a forum for shifting gender norms online' (see section 3.4.2).

However, there is substantial evidence in my analyses to suggest that dominant discourses such as 'gendered parenthood' and 'child-centric motherhood' can rarely be straightforwardly resisted or disavowed. I find, like motherhood scholars such as Lawler (2000) and Miller (2007), that dominant discourses of 'gendered parenthood' permeate Mumsnet users' interactions to the extent that, even where they negotiate and challenge these discourses, where they resist being positioned as particular subjects, they often do so through these discourses. This finding echoes Foucault's (1972) statement that it is not possible to speak outside of discourses. Mumsnet users may have a range of resources at their disposal to position themselves in relation to discourses, but that does not mean they can free themselves from social constraints. Indeed, as I show in section 7.4, the affordances of Mumsnet Talk may constrain users' access to diverse subject positions as much as they facilitate the negotiation of new and transformative subject positions. Pedersen and Smithson's (2013) conclusion that Mumsnet is a forum for shifting gender norms therefore seems both optimistic and simplistic, and the reservations of parenthood and the internet scholars such as Madge and O'Connor (2006) and Worthington (2005), who caution against the assumption that users interacting within online spaces can somehow transcend societal forces, highly salient.

I conclude by drawing attention to the value of scholarly analysis that is centred on the concept of discourses, as they are defined in this thesis (see sections 1.3.1 and 2.4). I have shown that by shining a spotlight on the way discourses are taken up and work to position individuals in everyday interaction, it is possible to uncover and highlight the subject positions available to individuals and some of the interactional moves that are necessary in order to negotiate these possibilities; to position the self in relation to wider social structures. I have also shown how being attentive to interdiscursive relations can open up possibilities for intersectional analyses. By unpacking the multiple discursive elements in the constitution of individual subjectivity at particular moments of interaction, it can become apparent just how ingrained 'common sense' subject positions such as the 'good mother' are, and how a range of discourses can be drawn in to the constitution of such subject positions, placing increasingly narrow and specific demands upon women who are parents. A discursive focus makes it apparent why and how digital technologies and contexts do not necessarily

allow their users to transcend social forces. The power of discourses, and especially dominant discourses, to position individuals in fixed and restrictive ways, and the difficulty of escaping dominant discourses, means that even when individuals are able to be particularly open and potentially subversive, they are still often subject to the same discursive forces. Thus, it remains difficult within Mumsnet Talk, as elsewhere, for women to escape dominant discourses that work to fix them in restricted, gendered subject positions. This and other key insights that have significance both for this study and broader academic and social contexts, will be emphasised in the final concluding chapter that follows.

Chapter 8. Conclusion

8.1. Introduction

In the introductory chapter, I set out my aim to explore what it means to be a mother for users of Mumsnet Talk. This broad aim has been refined as my study has progressed, particularly in response to my engagement with feminist poststructuralist theory. As the key principles and metalanguage of this paradigm have become increasingly central to the way I conceptualise the relationship between language, society and the individual, I have come to express this aim in terms of the *subject positions* that are available to and negotiated by users of Mumsnet Talk. Adopting a feminist poststructuralist perspective has brought me to understand that what it means to 'be a mother' is not completely a matter of 'free' personal choice or preference. Rather, it is a matter of negotiating a position amidst the multiple, sometimes competing, and often intersecting discourses that work to fix the meanings and subject positions around being a woman and a parent.

I use the term 'parent' more and more as this thesis progresses, largely in response to some Mumsnet users' own preference for this term, and my subsequent identification of 'parent' as a potentially transformative subject position that can allow individuals to escape a web of intersecting discourses of 'gendered parenthood'. As I look to the future, in this concluding chapter, it is therefore clear that my attention has shifted from a primary concern with what it means to be a *mother* to whether and how *parenthood* is constructed in gendered terms.

In this concluding chapter, I sum up the findings of this exploration of the discursive construction of motherhood through digital interaction, and their significance in a wider context. I focus on the contributions, both knowledge-based and methodological, that this thesis makes to the sociolinguistic discipline, particularly the fields of gender and language and language and digital communication.

8.2. Contributions made by this thesis

This thesis shows that discourses of 'gendered parenthood' are dominant and powerful in the context of the Mumsnet Talk threads I analyse, persistently working to position Mumsnet users in gendered parental subject positions, even where they work to resist being positioned in this way. These discourses both draw on and feed in to an overarching discourse of gender differentiation, working to position parents as male and female, as *mothers* and *fathers,* in increasingly specific and restrictive ways. I find that these discourses often operate interdiscursively, merging with one another and taking in other discourses, and that when this happens, they become more specialised

and powerful, positioning subjects at the centre of a web of intersecting forces that are difficult to escape. These findings have implications that go beyond this thesis, and even the academic context. As long as discourses of 'gendered parenthood' are dominant, legitimised and seen to represent 'common sense' meanings surrounding gender, parenthood and raising children, the subject positions available to parents will be limited. It will be difficult for male parents, for example, to position themselves as 'main parents', and difficult for female parents to position themselves in a way that is not related to their children.

However, I have also shown that Mumsnet users are able to draw on a range of resources to negotiate multiple ways of being and to resist dominant discourses that work to fix them in restricted, gendered, parental subject positions. I have suggested that the Mumsnet Talk forum itself offers particular opportunities and affordances that facilitate users' negotiation of discourses, and their ability to construct transformative discursive positions. The findings of this thesis are therefore able to support the implication in much parenthood and the internet research that online spaces can be fruitful sites for the resistance and subversion of dominant cultural norms. I also suggest, however, that digital contexts do not allow individuals to entirely escape the language through which discourses operate; language that can both empower, but also restrict the ways in which individuals can position themselves in the social world.

These findings offer a significant contribution of knowledge at the intersection of the sociolinguistic fields of gender and language and language and digital communication. They point to the relevance of studies that cross-cut these fields at a time when interactions and exchanges of information often take place through the internet and digital media, and which play an important role in people's understanding of the social world and their place within it. They show that sites like Mumsnet are deserving of greater analytical attention because they are places where ordinary people have the opportunity to negotiate and discuss wider social constructs such as 'motherhood', and thus may be key initiators of resistance, change and transformation.

This thesis also makes a methodological contribution that will be particularly useful for scholars whose research intersects the fields of gender and language and language and digital communication. In section 3.3, I point out that previous discursive studies of parenting and motherhood in a range of contexts have tended to neglect, first, the central role language plays in discursive struggles, and second, any clear explication of the means by which they arrive at claims about the presence of discourses. Even within the disciplines of Sociolinguistics and Discourse Studies, which are well placed to advance methods for identifying and analysing discourses, there has still been relatively little in the way of methodological insights, though there are notable

exceptions in the work of analysts such as Baxter (2003), Reisigl and Wodak (2009) and Sunderland (2000, 2004) (see section 2.4). In this thesis, I make a new methodological contribution by offering an approach to discursive analyses in digital contexts that captures my emphasis on language and emergent theory. This discursive-digital approach has particular relevance at a time where digital contexts are becoming increasingly popular research sites for scholars working across the social sciences. These digital settings are worthy of the same critical scrutiny that has been applied to contexts such as print media and face-to-face conversation, as this thesis has shown. Such spaces may be changing the ways in which people can position themselves in a wider social context, and my innovative methodology offers a new approach to understanding and analysing digital interactions and their wider significance in social context.

The openness and flexibility of my discursive-digital approach, especially the self-reflexivity that supports these principles, has also had important implications for my consideration of ethical issues when researching what is ostensibly considered to be a 'public' online forum. My approach has led me to develop a detailed understanding of Mumsnet Talk users' perceptions of the forum and the contributions they make to it. For example, I have shown that, by exercising their agency in imaginative ways, Mumsnet users are able to maintain a degree of privacy and anonymity in a highly accessible context at specific moments of interaction (see section 4.6). I also point to the complexity of the concept of anonymity in online contexts where users adopt pseudonymous usernames, suggesting that considerations around anonymity must include attention to how participants' sense of privacy and dignity *within* the research site can best be protected. As a result of these considerations, I have been able to make sensitive and well-considered ethical judgements that are well matched to my research context. I intend that my approach will inform the future practice of internet researchers who wish to make sensitive, informed ethical judgements that minimise the risk of harm to their participants.

8.3. Limitations and future research

This thesis focuses on constructions of motherhood at particular moments of interaction within a discussion forum that seems to address itself to quite a specific audience. This narrow focus is a strength of this study because it is well suited to my central aim, allowing me to explore the subject positions that are available to, and negotiated by, users of Mumsnet Talk in depth and detail. However, this specific focus is also a potential limitation. I have become increasingly aware throughout the research process that there are voices and groups who are persistently silenced and/or absent in the interactions of Mumsnet users, for example, parents or carers who do *not* position themselves as female, heterosexual and middle-class, unlike many of the participants in this

study. Issues around language, gender and parenthood are equally likely to be relevant to groups such as fathers, same-sex and/or working class parents. I therefore suggest that constructions of parenthood in a wider range of contexts, and by different groups of parents, are an important area for future research, as they may be able to offer further valuable insights in to the options that are available to parents in today's society.

The evident frustration of some Mumsnet users at being unable to escape gendered subject positions, particularly the 'good mother', is a clear and important sign that there is a need for further research in the area of language, gender and parenthood. Scholars working at the intersection of the fields of gender and language and language and digital communication are in a good position to meet this challenge. By further exploring, challenging and destabilising the persistence of fixed, restrictive subject positions for parents in digital contexts, we can develop deeper understanding of the social forces that pervade the lives of women who are parents and how they operate in everyday practice. Digital contexts offer particularly interesting and relevant sites for such studies, at a time where interactions and exchanges of information often take place, quite publicly, through digital media. They can offer unprecedented access to multiple perspectives, discursive struggles and transformative practices, as they happen in social context. My discursive-digital approach offers an excellent starting point for such explorations. In sum, through the kind of grounded, theoretical and self-reflexive explorations of language, gender and parenthood in digital contexts that have been promoted in this thesis, sociolinguists will 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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Appendices

Appendix A. Glossary of key terms

Affordance: What is made possible by a particular design, environment or technology (Gibson, 1979).

Analytical framework: a relatively flexible model or analytical structure.

Approve: to lend credence or legitimacy to something (in this thesis, especially discourses).

Approach: a distinctive way of conducting research that is based on key principles.

Asynchronous: involving a delay between production and reception (see section 1.2).

Axial coding: 'the process of relating categories to their subcategories' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998: 123)

Categories: superordinate nodes that encapsulate a number of other nodes, or sub-categories (see section 4.3.5).

Challenge: to position oneself in opposition with or against something (in this thesis, especially discourses).

Coding: assigning descriptive labels, or 'codes', to different parts of a text (see section 4.3.5).

Common sense: widely regarded to be everyday, normal, or obvious. The term derives from the work of Althusser (1979).

Compete: to be positioned against, and usually strive to overpower another.

Concept: an idea or distinctive way of capturing a phenomenon.

Corpus: a structured set of texts.

Digital: mediated through some form of electronic device, usually a computer or mobile phone (see section 1.3.3).

Discussion forum: an online platform whose users engage in (usually asynchronous) interaction with others, usually about common interests (see sections 1.1 and 1.2).

Discourses: constitutive practices that construct the social world and our perceptions of 'truth', 'reality' and 'knowledge' (see sections 1.3.1 and 2.4).

Discourse analysis: a diverse group of analytical approaches that focus centrally on 'discourse', though the way 'discourse' is defined in relation to these approaches will differ (see section 2.4.3).

Double-voicing: a linguistic resource whereby an individual brings their thoughts and intentions together with those of another (Baxter, 2014).

Ethnography: a tradition emerging from Anthropology that aims to understand cultures. Ethnography traditionally involves complete immersion in a natural setting for an extended period of time (Atkinson et al., 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; see section 4.2.1).

Feminist poststructuralism: a branch of poststructuralism that focuses on issues of language, power and society as they relate to issues of gender and sexuality (see section 2.3).

Focused coding: a form of coding that involves sorting data into significant categories, clarifying 'the theoretical centrality of certain ideas' by 'distinguishing those codes that have greater analytical power' (Charmaz, 2014: 140).

Gender: the common lay understanding relates to 'men' and 'women' as two relatively homogeneous and distinct social groups (Mills and Mullany, 2011; see section 1.3.2). In this thesis, these categories are understood to be socially constructed; defined by and located within society.

Grounded theory: an approach that focuses on developing new theory from the ground up, directly from data, rather than using data to support pre-existing theories (Glaser and Strauss 1967; see section 4.2.2).

Identity: a 'relational and socio-cultural phenomenon' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005: 585) that is concerned with individuals' sense of self and belonging (see section 1.3.1).

Index: a sign that comes to represent something else (Peirce, 1998 [1895]).

Informational norms: identifiable patterns of expectation about the normal and appropriate use of data that are achieved in social context (adapted from Nissenbaum, 2010).

Initial coding: a first stage of coding that involves close reading and line-by-line coding of text.

Interdiscursivity: interrelation between discourses (see section 2.4.2).

Internet: a medium through which digital communication can take place: 'a way of transmitting bits of information from one computer to another' (Hine, 2000: 2; see section 3.4.1)

Internet memes: units of cultural meaning that 'replicate and mutate' as they are rapidly shared across a range of online networks (Zappavigna, 2012: 100; see section 3.4.2).

Intersubjectivity: interrelation between subjects.

In Vivo: words taken directly from participants in the research setting.

Iterative: a cyclical repetition of processes.

Memo: a form of written record associated with grounded theory.

Methods: specific tools and techniques used in the research process.

Motherhood: like gender, a socially constructed phenomena that relates to the condition of being a female parent.

Negotiate: to navigate an individual position amidst a range of possibilities (in this thesis, especially in relation to discourses).

Nodes: digital holding points for coded references within NVivo.

NVivo: QSR International's qualitative data analysis software (see section 4.3.3).

Online: conducted via the internet (see section 3.4.1).

Play: a form of interaction that is imitative and/or involves experimentation with multiple possibilities (Danet et al, 1997).

Postmodernism: a broad movement that is epitomised by a spirit of questioning and uncertainty (see section 2.2).

Poststructuralism: a movement described as the theoretical branch of postmodernism (C. Butler, 2002) that draws attention to the central role of language in the constitution of social meanings (see section 2.2).

Potential discourses: themes, ideas or structures that are identified as potentially discursive but are not yet fully evidenced as such.

Power: understood in this thesis in poststructuralist terms, as a complex and shifting relation that produces unstable effects of superiority or domination (see section 2.4.1).

Pragmatic: a goal-oriented approach to research that takes in to account the particular conditions of the study.

Purposive sampling: a sampling method whereby 'decisions concerning the individuals to be included in the sample are taken by the researcher, based upon a variety of criteria' (Oliver, 2006).

Qualitative: small-scale, inductive, subjective, descriptive and non-numerical (Robson, 2011; see section 4.2).

Reference: coded data within a node.

Resist: to avoid being affected by something; especially, here, to avoid being positioned by discourses.

Resource: items, devices or strategies that can be drawn on for a particular purpose.

Saturation: the point at which further data collection, analysis or other research process 'does not shed any further light on the issue under investigation' (M. Mason, 2010; see also Charmaz, 2014; Corbin and Strauss, 2008).

Self-reflexivity: the process of scrutinising oneself, and one's own place in the research process (see chapter 4).

Single-voicing: where the speaker principally orients 'to themselves and perpetuating their own agenda, rather than to engaging with the interests and concerns of others' (Baxter, 2014: 4).

Sub-categories: nodes that are subsumed within other nodes, or 'categories' (see section 4.3.5)

Subjectivity: the condition of being subject to discursive frameworks (Skeggs, 1997) (see sections 1.3.1 and 2.4.1).

Synchronous: occurring in successive order, with very little delay between production and reception (see section 1.2).

Theoretical nodes: 'integrative' nodes that begin to tell an 'analytic story' (Charmaz, 2014: 150).

Theoretical sampling: a sampling method associated with grounded theory that 'focuses on finding *new data sources…* that can best explicitly address specific theoretically interesting facets of the emergent analysis' (Clarke, 2003: 577, her emphasis).

Themes: recurring ideas, or *groups* of ideas, statements, beliefs or values.

Trees: A system of organising nodes (Gibbs, 2002; Bazeley, 2007), whereby categories serve as connecting points for sub-categories, so that relationships between nodes begin to resemble the branches of trees (see section 4.3.5).

Appendix B. Distinctive linguistic and digital resources found in Mumsnet Talk

- **Acronyms**: DD/S/H (darling daughter/son/husband), AIBU (am I being unreasonable), MN (mumsnet), PFB (precious first born);
- **Word reductions**: pg (pregnant), bf (breastfeeding), obvs (obviously), 'yr' (year);
- **Asterisks**: 'explana*tory*' - used for a range of functions, including corrections and emphasis;
- **Strikethrough text for 'taboo' utterances**: 'little ~~cow~~ darling', 'don't fight it ~~or are you shallow~~';
- **Brackets**: <sideways look and inward tut tut>, <<shrugs>>, {preens}, (whispers), <<and we have a winner>> - can represent non-verbal actions, sounds, directions or 'off-stage' announcements;
- **Sounds presented in written form**: 'bleeugh', 'Pahaha. He sounds so funny.';
- **Capitals for emphasis/volume**: 'I am right, I AM!';
- **Puns, humour, cultural or literary references in usernames**: SheWhoDaresGins (a play on the idiom 'he who dares wins'); 'cakesonatrain' (a play on the film title 'snakes on a train'), 'guggenheim' (the name of a famous museum in New York) 'BertieBotts (the name of sweet manufacturer from the Harry Potter book and film series);
- **Smilies**: :
- **Other images**: e.g. (cake), (flowers);
- **Non-standard grammar**: 'I loves me an All Inc holiday';
- **Nonstandard vocabulary/neologisms**: 'vomming', 'mumboots', 'UberMum';
- **Creative use of punctuation and spelling**: 'these threads are…………… booooooooooring', 'you clean your loo brush in the dishwasher?!?!?!?!?!', 'I am forrin [foreign]', 'my skillz will show up her sunken lemon drizzle cake', 'naice Cath Kidson florals';
- **Direct address to other users in bold**: 'Oh god, **grinand**'.

Appendix C. Final list of nodes created through data construction

Appendix C1. Overview of categories

Name	Sources	References
constructing identities	41	556
describing or enacting gender roles	49	1368
describing or enacting parenting 'norms'	49	1833
factors influencing parenting 'norms'	31	382
negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms'	43	1008

Appendix C2. Constructing identities: sub-categories

Name	Sources	References
constructing identities	41	556
identifying as a mum	32	237
identifying as a parent	26	161
'I'm not just a mother'	17	141
'motherhood isn't a one size fits all'	4	6
rediscovering myself	2	11
describing or enacting gender roles	49	1368
describing or enacting parenting 'norms'	49	1833
factors influencing parenting 'norms'	31	382
negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms'	43	1008

Appendix C3. Describing or enacting gender roles: sub-categories

Name	Sources	References
constructing identities	41	556
describing or enacting gender roles	49	1368
'societal pressure'	5	24
'wife as property'	2	26
'your only purpose as a woman is to give birth'	11	143
mother as main parent	20	246
enacting stereotypically 'feminine' qualities and language	44	559
'all children are cute'	9	42
being creative	6	25
supporting each other and sharing experiences	17	80
'don't beat yourself up'	15	82
'women should be homemakers'	22	187
being a 'good mum'.	16	63
being a 'good father'	2	6
working fathers	16	106
describing or enacting parenting 'norms'	49	1833
factors influencing parenting 'norms'	31	382
negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms'	43	1008

Appendix C4. Describing or enacting parenting 'norms': sub-categories

Nodes

Name	Sources	References
constructing identities	41	556
describing or enacting gender roles	49	1368
describing or enacting parenting 'norms'	49	1833
acting intuitively	11	70
'babies fit in with you'	1	9
becoming a mother changes your life	3	36
being 'consumed' by motherhood	6	15
'I don't really go out any more'	2	14
'motherhood has changed me for the better'	2	21
being calm, in control and responsible	21	202
being held responsible	18	70
'a bit of creative fun'	7	40
being in a heterosexual relationship	44	443
being positive about, supportive and proud of your children	18	150
describing motherhood in positive terms	7	55
entertaining children	6	12
even the most difficult aspects of motherhood are wonderful	1	9
high-achieving parenting	10	36
'I love my children'	10	55
looking after, caring for and protecting children.	25	183
'providing for my family'	3	10
putting children's needs first	24	174
valuing expert advice	15	105
becoming an expert	10	69
'the breastfeeding imperative'	16	52
wanting the best for your children and knowing what's right for them	14	83
wanting to be slim, healthy and attractive	11	42
wanting to be with your children	15	89
factors influencing parenting 'norms'	31	382
negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms'	43	1008

Appendix C5. Factors influencing parenting 'norms': sub-categories

Nodes

Name	Sources	References
constructing identities	41	556
describing or enacting gender roles	49	1368
describing or enacting parenting 'norms'	49	1833
factors influencing parenting 'norms'	31	382
'generational difference'	8	14
'it's a cultural thing'	2	34
'middle class parenting cliche'	11	149
relating age to parenting experiences	12	98
negotiating the 'right' circumstances for a child	13	87
negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms'	43	1008

Appendix C6. Negotiating or rejecting gender roles: sub-categories

Nodes

Name	Sources	References
constructing identities	41	556
describing or enacting gender roles	49	1368
describing or enacting parenting 'norms'	49	1833
factors influencing parenting 'norms'	31	382
negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
being uncertain about or against having children	5	83
using gender-neutral terminology	30	134
father as main parent	5	27
sharing household duties	4	22
caring for children is a shared responsibility	26	410
sharing responsibility between family	15	64
sharing responsibility between parents	21	96
sharing responsibility between the wider community	1	26
sharing responsibility between women	10	43
working mothers	16	110
swearing	34	120
negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms'	43	1008

Appendix C7. Negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms': sub-categories

Nodes

Name	Sources	References
constructing identities	41	556
describing or enacting gender roles	49	1368
describing or enacting parenting 'norms'	49	1833
factors influencing parenting 'norms'	31	382
negotiating or rejecting gender roles	48	908
negotiating or rejecting parenting 'norms'	43	1008
being a 'good enough' mum	11	49
'being a mum is hard'	30	277
being negative about your children	18	131
'fake it till you make it'	3	12
feeling guilty, ashamed or like a failure	19	92
forgetting your children	3	72
looking after mothers' needs	28	313
enjoying food	8	51
'looking after my needs'	23	141
making time for interests that are 'just about me'	6	76
'ownership of your body'	3	45
losing your temper, losing control and being irresponsible	14	70
not wanting to be with your children	5	18
struggling with mental health	14	71
'The love switch is a myth'	2	34

Appendix F. Stage 2 Analysis nodes: 'Your identity as a mother'

Appendix F1. Overview of stage 2 nodes

Name		Sources	References
adjusting		1	5
age of children		1	28
apologetic or uncertain about expression		1	28
awareness of societal expectations, norms		1	11
'being' childless		1	1
belonging to a 'tribe'		1	4
categories		1	36
change		1	22
child centricity		1	41
comparing motherhood with a 'job'		1	1
conceptualising the 'self'		0	0
continuity		1	22
contradiction		1	2
'cut yourself some slack'		1	1
emphasising class, wealth, culture		1	2
'fake it till you make it'		1	6
getting parenting or motherhood 'right'		1	9
getting, being pregnant		1	8
having a 'life'		1	2
'having it all'		1	4
imagery, metaphors		0	0
individuality		1	51
jobs, careers as 'superficial'		1	3
linguistic features		0	0
literary or media reference		1	11
loss		1	7
multiplicity of 'identity'		1	7
mum, mother, mummy references		1	9
mundanity, boredom		1	4
not having choice or control of your life		1	6
'old me'		1	8
parent references		1	11
being a 'lone parent'		1	5
'being' a parent		1	13
parent as a verb		1	9
physical markers of achievement - badge, plaque		1	3
reference to men		1	21
referencing or addressing other posters		1	39
rejecting gendered roles		1	1
struggles and challenges		1	13
'total' motherhood		1	118
what 'others' think, say and do		1	29
work-centred identity		0	0
at work - at home distinction		1	6
being a worker, having a job or career		1	42
highlighting education, intelligence, ambition, professionalism		1	15

Appendix F2. The 'total' motherhood category and its sub-categories

'total' motherhood	1	126
'being' a mum	1	67
being a SAHM	1	8
being an 'attachment parent'	1	3
being at home, private, domestic	1	4
desire for children or motherhood	1	8
'I don't know who I am'	1	10
inevitability of motherhood	1	3
mother as 'whole woman'	1	8
'total' motherhood	1	23

Appendix F3. The 'child centricity' category and its sub-categories

child centricity	1	41
being 'needed' by children	1	1
expressing love for children	1	13
'I don't matter'	1	3
positivity towards children	1	7
pride in children	1	2
putting children first	1	15

Appendix F4. The 'individuality' category and its sub-categories

individuality	1	51
being 'me'	1	22
choice and control	1	15
highlighting hobbies, interests, individuality	1	14

Appendix F5. The 'reference to men' category and its sub-categories

reference to men	1	36
equality between parents	1	8
comparison with dads or men	1	7

Appendix G. Stage 2 analysis nodes: 'Can we have a child exchange?'

Appendix G1. Overview of stage 2 nodes

child exchange			
Name		Sources	References
⊞ child centricity		1	207
⊞ expressing needs and feelings		1	52
⊞ indexing class		1	116
⊞ indexing femininity		1	88
reference to men		1	1
⊞ the classified advertisement frame		1	372

Appendix G2. the 'the classified advertisement frame' category and its sub-categories

Name	Sources	References
the classified advertisement frame	1	369
describing children	1	137
metaphors for children	1	6
negative evaluations	1	41
negatives as positives - sales spin	1	19
positive evaluations	1	41
positives as negatives - 'stealth boast'	1	7
positivity towards children	1	41
voice of child	1	8
ellipsis	1	31
formal, sophisticated linguistic choices	1	92
cause and effect	1	4
conditional clauses	1	13
formal lexis	1	66
nominalisation	1	1
passive voice	1	3
very complex sentences	1	5
heavily modified nouns	1	19
objectification of children	1	37
stock phrases	1	53

Appendix G3. The 'indexing femininity' category and its sub-categories

Name	Sources	References
indexing femininity	1	88
affective emphasis	1	12
'baby talk'	1	14
intensive adjectives	1	28
euphemisms	1	11
intensifiers	1	22
superpoliteness	1	1

Appendix G4. The 'indexing class' category and its sub-categories

Name	Sources	References
indexing class	1	116
formal, sophisticated linguistic choices	1	94
reference to wealth, culture, opportunity	1	22

Appendix G5. The 'child-centricity' category and its sub-categories

Name	Sources	References
child centricity	1	233
putting children first	1	24
expressing love for, pride in children	1	38
desire for children	1	8
describing children	1	163
metaphors for children	1	6
negative evaluations	1	41
negatives as positives - sales spin	1	19
positive evaluations	1	41
positives as negatives - 'stealth boast'	1	7
positivity towards children	1	41
voice of child	1	8

PhD Student Research Ethics

Approval Form (REC1)

PLEASE NOTE: You MUST gain approval for any research BEFORE any research takes place. Failure to do so could result in a ZERO mark

Name Jai Mackenzie

Student Number 139157851

Proposed Thesis title: The Discursive Construction of Motherhood through Digital Interaction

1. **What are the aim(s) of your research?**

To explore the discursive construction of motherhood *by mothers* on the Mumsnet website's 'talk' forum.

The research will proceed from the following research questions:

1. How is 'mother' constructed as a gendered subject position within Mumsnet Talk interactions?
2. Do 'norms' of motherhood prevail in Mumsnet users' digital interactions?
3. How are Mumsnet users positioned, and how do they position themselves, in relation to discourses of motherhood?

2. **What research methods do you intend to use?**

This research will be based on the study of written interactions taken from the Mumsnet 'talk' forum. These data are available in the public domain.

This research project will adopt a primarily qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, starting with a period of observation. During the observational period, I intend to visit the forum regularly and keep detailed notes. I will continually identify and save any threads which could be relevant to my research aims. As well as saving threads as pdf files in an NVivo workspace, I will also save two other versions of each thread in a data file on my personal computer: a simple word document and a text file.

By the end of the period of observation, data collection and preliminary analysis, I will have a log of a range of interactions from the Mumsnet 'talk' forum. At this point, I will conduct close linguistic analyses of selected interactions.

3. **Please give details of the type of informant, the method of access and sampling, and the location(s) of your fieldwork (see guidance notes).**

My research subjects will be mothers who participate in discussions within the Mumsnet 'talk' forum. These subjects will not need to be 'recruited' in the traditional sense, because their interactions are freely available for the public to read.

My research will be carried out at a computer with an internet connection, which will enable me to access the Mumsnet website. I intend to spend approximately five months observing interactions and collecting and analysing threads from the Mumsnet 'talk' forum.

4. **Please give full details of all ethical issues which arise from this research**

Minimal ethical issues are likely to arise from this research project, because the Mumsnet 'talk' forum is freely available to anyone with an internet connection, and the researcher will have no direct contact with research participants at all. This makes issues of informed consent and anonymity largely irrelevant, though these subjects will be addressed briefly in section 5, along with the general issues of confidentiality and data storage and protection.

One important area for ethical consideration is the potential sensitivity or vulnerability of research participants. As I will not recruit or select specific subjects for observation, and indeed know very little about any of the research subjects other than what they post on the site, there is a possibility that I may come across vulnerable individuals, or very sensitive or personal topics of discussion. These issues will be addressed as indicated in section 5.

5. **What steps are you taking to address these ethical issues?**

Informed consent will not be sought from participants before data are collected or analysed because the Mumsnet 'talk' forum is so explicitly public. However, in view of uncertainty regarding what *users* perceive to be 'public', and how they anticipate their interactions will be used, I will avoid any threads which take on a particularly 'private' nature, or deal with personal or sensitive topics.

The public nature of the Mumsnet 'talk' forum makes it strictly unnecessary to consider issues of anonymisation and confidentiality. However, I have seen that Mumsnet users guard their privacy very carefully by creating pseudonymous usernames. It is also common practice for Mumsnet users to change their usernames regularly, particularly if they realise they have shared information which may make them identifiable to others, or if they post something which they later regret. I therefore intend to protect participants' anonymity, confidentiality and data by taking the following steps:

- Usernames will be anonymised where any threads or posts are reproduced for analysis;
- Data will only be collected from the 'chat' section of the forum. This will guarantee the anonymity of participants, as threads from this section are no longer publically

available 90 days after the first post. Any direct quotes used after this time will therefore not be 'searchable';

- Data will be kept electronically on a secure computer and secure USB drive.

To avoid studying potentially vulnerable individuals, causing potential offence or emotional harm to research subjects, or even violating laws against defamation, I will be selective in my choice of material to be read and analysed. The following types of discussion will be avoided:

- Threads/ posts dealing with sensitive topics;
- Threads/ posts which could be considered to be defamatory; i.e. to harm the reputation of any individual;
- Posts by (or about) a seemingly vulnerable individual.

Any posts which suggest that an individual is at serious risk, or where an individual makes defamatory or other damaging comments to another, will be reported to Mumsnet. I will take this step because I believe that I have a responsibility to take reasonable action where any research subject is potentially at risk.

6. What issues for the personal safety of the researcher(s) arise from this research? and 7. What steps will be taken to minimise the risks of personal safety to the researchers?

Little risk to my own personal safety is likely to arise from this research. All research will take place in my own work space and no contact will be made with participants. One feasible risk is over-use of my computer and the internet in particular. Risk to my safety seems unlikely here, but there have been cases where serious illness and even deaths have been linked to internet 'addiction'. In order to avoid this potential risk, I will alternate my online research (including observation and data collection) with other research activities, and not exceed a maximum of three hours spent online per day.

There is also a possibility that there may be posts on the Mumsnet 'talk' forum that I would find upsetting. As noted in section 5, however, I will avoid threads or posts with sensitive, personal or malicious content. If I encounter a situation in which I believe an individual is at serious risk of harm or defamation, I will report my concerns to Mumsnet.

PhD Student Research Ethics

Approval Form (REC1)

> **PLEASE NOTE: You MUST gain approval for any research BEFORE any research takes place. Failure to do so could result in a ZERO mark**
>
> **Name** Jai Mackenzie
>
> **Student Number** 139157851
>
> **Proposed Thesis title:** The Discursive Construction of Motherhood through Digital Interaction

1. **What are the aim(s) of your research?**

To explore the discursive construction of motherhood *by mothers* on the Mumsnet website's 'talk' forum.

The research will proceed from the following research questions:

4. How is 'mother' constructed as a gendered subject position within Mumsnet Talk interactions?
5. Do 'norms' of motherhood prevail in Mumsnet users' digital interactions?
6. How are Mumsnet users positioned, and how do they position themselves, in relation to discourses of motherhood?

2. **What research methods do you intend to use?**

This research will be based on the study of written interactions taken from the Mumsnet 'talk' forum. These data are available in the public domain.

This research project will adopt a primarily qualitative approach to data collection and analysis, starting with a period of observation. During the observational period, I intend to visit the forum regularly and keep detailed notes. I will continually identify and save any threads which could be relevant to my research aims. As well as saving threads as pdf files in an NVivo workspace, I will also save two other versions of each thread in a data file on my personal computer: a simple word document and a text file.

By the end of the period of observation, data collection and preliminary analysis, I will have a log of a range of interactions from the Mumsnet 'talk' forum. At this point, I will conduct close linguistic analyses of selected interactions.

3. **Please give details of the type of informant, the method of access and sampling, and the location(s) of your fieldwork (see guidance notes).**

My research subjects will be mothers who participate in discussions within the Mumsnet 'talk' forum. These subjects will not need to be 'recruited' in the traditional sense, because their interactions are freely available for the public to read.

My research will be carried out at a computer with an internet connection, which will enable me to access the Mumsnet website. I intend to spend approximately five months observing interactions and collecting and analysing threads from the Mumsnet 'talk' forum.

4. **Please give full details of all ethical issues which arise from this research**

Although the Mumsnet 'talk' forum is explicitly public, I believe that there is uncertainty regarding what *users* perceive to be 'public', and how they anticipate their interactions will be used. I therefore believe that potential distress may be caused to participants if their words and usernames are used for a purpose they have not consented to. These issues will be addressed in section 5.

5. **What steps are you taking to address these ethical issues?**

I will seek informed consent from participants whose contributions will be analysed in detail, and potentially quoted in publications or presentations. I will do this by sending a personal message, through the Mumsnet site itself, to everyone who contributed to the threads I would like to analyse in detail (see Appendix A). This message will contain two links: one to a very short 'survey', which will function as a consent form. This survey will ask participants to give their Mumsnet username, state whether they agree for their contributions to be used for research purposes, and whether (and to what extent) they would like their contributions to be anonymised (see Appendix A). The second link will direct participants to a page within my personal blog (see Appendix B). This page provides much more detailed information about myself and my research.

The issues of anonymity and confidentiality have also been considered in detail. I have seen through my observation of interactions within the Mumsnet 'talk' forum that Mumsnet users guard their privacy very carefully. Not only do they create pseudonymous usernames, many change their usernames regularly, particularly if they realise they have shared information which may make them identifiable to others, or if they post something which they later regret. I therefore intend to protect participants' anonymity, confidentiality and data by taking the following steps:

- Participants can choose to have their usernames anonymised where any threads or posts are reproduced for analysis;
- Participants can also choose to have any 'revealing' information in their posts anonymised, such as specific names of places in their locality;
- Data will only be collected from the 'chat' section of the forum. This will guarantee the anonymity of participants, as threads from this section are no longer publically available 90 days after the first post. Any direct quotes used after this time will therefore not be 'searchable';
- Data will be kept electronically on a secure computer and secure USB drive.

To avoid studying potentially vulnerable individuals, causing potential offence or emotional harm to research subjects, or even violating laws against defamation, I will be selective in my choice of material to be read and analysed. The following types of discussion will be avoided:

- Threads/ posts dealing with sensitive topics;
- Threads/ posts which could be considered to be defamatory; i.e. to harm the reputation of any individual;
- Posts by (or about) a seemingly vulnerable individual.

Any posts which suggest that an individual is at serious risk, or where an individual makes defamatory or other damaging comments to another, will be reported to Mumsnet. I will take this step because I believe that I have a responsibility to take reasonable action where any research subject is potentially at risk.

6. **What issues for the personal safety of the researcher(s) arise from this research? and**
7. **What steps will be taken to minimise the risks of personal safety to the researchers?**

Little risk to my own personal safety is likely to arise from this research. All research will take place in my own work space and no contact will be made with participants. One feasible risk is over-use of my computer and the internet in particular. Risk to my safety seems unlikely here, but there have been cases where serious illness and even deaths have been linked to internet 'addiction'. In order to avoid this potential risk, I will alternate my online research (including observation and data collection) with other research activities, and not exceed a maximum of three hours spent online per day.

There is also a possibility that there may be posts on the Mumsnet 'talk' forum that I would find upsetting. As noted in section 5, however, I will avoid threads or posts with sensitive, personal or malicious content. If I encounter a situation in which I believe an individual is at serious risk of harm or defamation, I will report my concerns to Mumsnet.

Appendix J. Personal messages sent to potential participants

Appendix J1. Personal message sent to contributors to the 'Your identity as a mother' thread (first 29)

Subject: 'Your identity as a mother' thread

Dear [insert Mumsnet username],

I'm writing to ask your permission to use your contributions to the thread 'Your identity as a mother' in my research study.

I'm a postgraduate researcher at Aston University's department of Applied Linguistics. I'm also a mother to a 4 and 5 year old and I've been a Member of Mumsnet for 20 months. My research explores the way motherhood is presented in everyday interactions.

If you are happy for me to use your posts and to leave them exactly as they are, you don't need to do anything. However, you can request that your posts are 1) fully anonymised, or 2) not used at all, via this online consent form: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/T2QLJDJ. You need to do this by Monday, 9th February.

If you would like to find out more about me and my research before making a decision, you can visit my blog, at www.jaimack.wordpress.com. I've set up a section here called 'information for research participants'.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message.

Jai Mackenzie

Appendix J2. Amended message sent to contributors to the 'Your identity as a mother' thread (30-70)

Subject: 'Your identity as a mother' thread

Dear [insert Mumsnet username],

I'm writing to ask your permission to use your contributions to the thread 'Your identity as a mother' in my research study.

I'm a postgraduate researcher at Aston University's department of Applied Linguistics. I'm also a mother to a 4 and 5 year old and I've been a Member of Mumsnet for 20 months. My research explores the way motherhood is presented in everyday interactions.

If you are happy for me to use your posts and to leave them exactly as they are, please let me know by completing this online consent form: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/T2QLJDJ. Here, you will also be able to request that your posts are 1) fully anonymised, or 2) not used at all.

If you would like to find out more about me and my research before making a decision, you can visit my blog, at www.jaimack.wordpress.com. I've set up a section here called 'information for research participants'.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message.

Jai Mackenzie

Appendix J3. Third revision of personal message, sent to contributors of the 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread.

Subject: 'Can we have a child exchange?' thread

Dear [insert Mumsnet username],

I'm writing to ask your permission to use your contribution to the thread [insert title here] in my research study.

I'm a postgraduate researcher at Aston University's department of Applied Linguistics. I'm also a mother to a 4 and 5 year old and I've been a Member of Mumsnet for 20 months. My research explores the way motherhood is presented in everyday interactions.

I apologise for contacting you out of the blue. It's important for my research that I use 'real' interaction, not something artificial created by a researcher. That's why I made the decision to find existing threads that are well suited to my study, rather than contacting you first. I have been in communication with MNHQ, who have approved my decision to reach out to you in this way.

You can let me know of your decision via this online consent form: https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/T2QLJDJ. Here, you will have the option to: 1) give your consent for me to use your posts and to leave them exactly as they are; 2) request that your posts are fully anonymised, or 3) request that your posts are not used at all.

I realise that you may like to see your contribution(s) before deciding whether to consent. The thread is no longer accessible via the Mumsnet site, but I can either copy and paste your contribution into a PM or send the whole thread via email. Please do respond to my message if you would like me to do this, or if you have any other questions or concerns. If I don't hear from you at all, I will assume that you have not given your consent.

If you would like to find out more about me and my research before making a decision, you can visit my blog, at www.jaimack.wordpress.com. I've set up a section here called 'information for research participants'.

Thank you for taking the time to read this message.

Appendix K. Online consent form sample

Aston University

Illustration removed for copyright restrictions

Appendix L. Text from blog page providing further information

Web link: https://jaimack.wordpress.com/information-for-research-participants/

Title: Information for Research Participants

Dear Mumsnet members,

Thank you for finding this page and taking the time to read more about me and my research.

To start with, you may like to know a little more about why I'd like to use your contributions and what I will do with them. I've chosen three threads from the Mumsnet 'talk' forum that I think deal directly with the theme of motherhood and will help me to answer my research questions. My analysis of these threads will form part of my PhD thesis and your contributions may be quoted. I may also use analyses and quotes in presentations or publications for an academic audience. All data collected from the Mumsnet 'talk' forum are stored electronically, on a password-protected computer and password-protected USB drive that only I can access.

A brief look at my blog entries over the past year or so will tell you a few things about me. Firstly, I'm a feminist, and this is an important part of my research. Being a feminist, for me, means that I'm interested in issues of gender, sexuality and identity. I'm interested in what it means to be a woman or a man, both, or neither, straight, gay or bisexual, feminine or masculine, and how we are defined by these terms. As far as my PhD research goes, I'm particularly interested in what it means to be a 'mother', how mothers themselves define this term and how motherhood is linked to ideas about femininity and womanhood. I'd like to explore and highlight the countless ways of being a mother, or defining motherhood, and the tensions, contradictions and negotiations that are part of these definitions. I hope to open up new, challenging and alternative meanings of motherhood that are consistent with mothers' lived experiences.

I've already mentioned in my message to you that I'm a mother myself. I think it's important for you to know this, and to know that I want to represent the Mumsnet community as a member and a mother, not as an 'outsider'. On the Mumsnet 'talk' forum, contrary to what the tabloids might have us believe, I've seen so much understanding, tolerance and acceptance of other people's lives and beliefs. This is something I aim to recreate in my own research. It can be difficult, impossible even, not to let my own beliefs and values cloud my response to others' posts, but I am committed to recognising my values and beliefs for what they are: just one of many possible perspectives. Throughout my research, I have been interrogating, and will continue to interrogate, my own perspectives and biases, in the interests of representing the many voices of Mumsnet that are sometimes very similar, but often very different, from my own.

A few final points: I have high standards in relation to ethics, particularly in the emerging area of researching online communities. My research has been approved by the Aston University research ethics committee; in fact, it goes beyond their requirements. It is entirely your choice whether you wish to take part. You don't have to do anything if you are happy for me to use your contributions and to keep them as they are, but if not you will need to fill in my online consent form (insert link here), where you will be able to state your preferences clearly. You need to do this by Monday, 26th January 2015. If you do agree to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. You may want to review the thread before making a decision; if you can't access it via the Mumsnet site, you can email me and I will send you a copy.

Thank you for taking an interest in my research and reading this far. If you'd still like to know more about me and my research, please don't hesitate to contact me at mackenj1@aston.ac.uk.

Jai

Appendix N. 'Your identity as a mother' memos

Memo 1. Reading 1 memo: 'your identity as a mother' – written 05/06/2014

I saw this thread on 'discussions of the day', so it was obviously something Mumsnet wanted to encourage people to talk about. I was drawn to it straight away as it so explicitly deals with the subject I want to explore. I hoped to see a range of competing perspectives here and that is what I found. A few posters to this thread rejected the gendered term 'mother' in favour of 'parent'; some did this very directly, e.g. notcitrus, who said 'I feel much more of a parent than a 'mum'... I didn't feel anything female-specific: this really exposes the unnecessary gendering of mum/ dad: both are parents! One post also makes an explicit comparison with men as parents: 'I never hear men say 'I'm a dad...' This rejection of gendered 'mum' was, however, uncommon. A large number said they felt 'defined' by motherhood, though whether they felt this was a positive thing varied. Some completely embraced and revelled in having a 'mum' identity, some said it made them a better person; others talked about having a sense of 'losing' themselves - one even admitted to having had suicidal thoughts.

I found it interesting that many posters clearly separated their 'mum' identity from their 'real me' identity - as if 'mum' is a borrowed identity: perhaps they feel it is as it is so tied up with expectations, dominant discourses? Some refer simply to 'mum' vs. 'real me'; many refer to their 'mum' identity in contrast with their work identity. This reminded me of the motherhood literature - mums are negotiating work with motherhood; this is talked about quite a lot. Some acknowledge that the 'mum' identity has completely taken over them - '100% mum'.

Some cling to 'the real me' identity very fiercely, rejecting the 'mum' identity. I felt I could really identify with this, and sometimes felt that I reacted negatively to posters who very much identified as 'mums'. [Crazym], for example, 'hates being identified as 'mum' - I have a name! I am a person'. Several don't like being called 'so-and-so's mum'. Some posters reacted against this negative attitude towards identifying as 'mums', which Justine Roberts had clearly picked up on in her article 'when did 'mum' become a dirty word'? This made me question my views - others were asking why we should see being a 'mum' in a negative light.

Some posts explicitly showed awareness of the way their 'identities' were controlled by external forces, [Viglioso] in particular ('it's like we're being conditioned to be a frumpy saint in advance').

[AssertiveDecorations] refers to the 'fake it til you make it' phase of parenthood - crossover with 'DD has gone' thread. A recognised discourse on MN? This seems to be marginalised in a wider context but here people seem to feel they can admit to not feeling instant love for their children/ not feeling what they are 'supposed' to feel?

Memo 2. Reading 2 memo: 'your identity as a mother', written 30/09/2014

The most prominent and relevant node for this thread was 'motherhood is an all-consuming role'. Many MNers in this thread refer to their identity being almost entirely caught up in 'motherhood'. Many posts negotiate/ resist this idea, though, rejecting the idea that motherhood defines them at all, or that being a mother has changed them, or aspects of their lives, but not necessarily that it 'consumes' everything about them. I considered, on several occasions, creating a new node called 'motherhood changes you', but decided against this for the time being as there was a lot of cross-over between this and the idea that motherhood is all-consuming. I did add some new nodes, though, including 'being a mother is a wonderful, positive experience' and 'there are set criteria for being a 'good mum'. I chose the latter because there are quite a lot of references in this thread, and in others, I thought, to 'doing a great job'/ 'being a good mum' - posters, in this thread and others, often reassure each other that they're good mums. So there are clearly markers they're picking up on - certain things that they think make them good parents. I wondered whether this might line up with the themes I'm identifying, such as 'mothers are caring', 'mothers put their children's needs first'. I thought this might be something interesting to explore at a later date. With the former, some posts really did seem to convey this message loud and clear, and I felt I'd also come across the 'motherhood is wonderful' theme many times before in other threads - though it's challenged a lot, too! A final node that I added was 'mothers parent instinctively', based on the references in this thread (and others) to the idea that mothers instinctively know what to do/ how to 'be' a mother. This is often contested here! The range of responses on people's feelings about motherhood also touched on a lot of key themes already identified, so many nodes were frequently used, such as 'mothers love their children unequivocally', 'mothers put their children's needs first'. This thread confirmed the importance of these themes.

I was actually surprised at how many admitted feeling that motherhood did define them, especially after reading 'where do you lot get off?', which so challenges this view. This shows, perhaps, that the question you ask can really affect the impression you get! There were some very similar posts in both threads, though, and I found them quite bleak: posters who said they felt they had 'lost themselves' were not uncommon: a very sad example of all-consuming motherhood which shows, perhaps, why some MNers are so keen to emphasise their own interests, and disassociate themselves from a wholly 'maternal' identity. I think those posts that really reject the 'mum' label are very interesting - why do these posters feel this is something they don't want to associate themselves with? I do empathise - I have wanted to disassociate from this myself: all sorts of connotations come with being a mother that you might not want to bring to the workplace. Posters' negotiations/ ruminations on how much they feel being a 'mum' consumes their identity shows that most see themselves as being somewhere on a cline between 'all mum' (motherhood consumes them; they are not 'me') and 'all me'. I

thought it was very interesting that so many saw it as such a dichotomy, though many do challenge this idea, such as Thurlow, who says 'I'm now me and a mum' and Sillylass79, who says 'in reality I don't think these things are easily separated'. NB when the degree to which motherhood is an all-consuming role is negotiated, there's usually a consensus that motherhood becomes gradually and incrementally less consuming as your children get older.

There are probably more gender-relevant comments in this thread than in any other; many challenge the term 'mum' and talk about men's involvement/ parenting, too. Towards the end of the thread there are some very direct discussions/ comments about the position of women in society, and how women are portrayed. This thread is an excellent candidate for further detailed linguistic analysis, and I think it would be particularly interesting to do an analysis focusing on intertextuality, which might be helpful in identifying discourses. This is a very intertextual thread, with references to literature ('Daughter and Father' by Alice Munro, Joanna Trollope's books, a poster's own literature, Justine Roberts' post/ 'Red' article on 'when did mum become a dirty word?' and Hadley Freeman's guardian article responding to comments made by Kirstie Allsopp. There are also a number of general references to how women are perceived 'in society' and 'in the media'.

Appendix O. 'Total motherhood' in 'Your identity as a mother'

In post 75, ███████ (henceforth 'Nonie') positions herself firmly within the theme of motherhood total

███████

1. Being a mother was all I ever wanted to be. I felt like a shadow of a person before.
2. Raising my children is by far the most important thing in my life. There are lots of
3. hobbies and activities I want to do, but I have chosen to put them off until my
4. children are a lot older and need me less. I know for some people that would be a
5. dreadful thought, but I'm doing exactly what I want and am incredibly fulfilled by it.

By positioning the relational (clause) 'being a mother' at the start of this sentence and the pronoun 'I' within the adjectival (phrase/clause) 'all I ever wanted to be', Nonie places herself in a passive position, as one who is influenced by the relational process of 'being a mother'. In this way, she de-emphasises her own agency and implies that her 'personhood' exists only through her self-positioning as a 'mother'. An alternative realisation of this sentiment which would position her as an actor in this process would be 'I've always wanted to be a mother'. In this way, Nonie not only positions herself as a mother, but also creates the impression that she is positioned *by* motherhood; 'mother' is a role that has an active influence in her life. This construction is also more emphatic than the alternative, suggesting that this is a statement of fact, rather than an expression of her wants and desires. The opening sentence of line 2 has a similar structure, as shown below:

1) Being a mother	was	all I ever wanted to be
2) Raising my children	is	by far the most important thing in my life
process	**verb**	**adjectival phrase**

In the second example, Nonie places the process 'raising my children' in subject-initial position and again does not position herself as an actor in this process. This again has the effect of positioning her in relation to her role as a mother; or rather the process of 'raising her children', and also of making this statement bald and emphatic. Nonie's use of the superlative 'most', further modified and intensified by the prepositional phrase 'by far', expresses the importance of 'raising her children' in her life as similarly absolute. The similarity between these sentences suggest that, for Nonie, two themes that are separated in this section: 'total motherhood' and 'child-centricity' (see section 2.3), are intertwined.

Taken together, 'all I ever wanted to be' and 'by far the most important thing in my life' function to evaluate the processes of 'being a mother' and 'raising my children' in unequivocally positive terms and as processes that have an absolute influence over her life. In doing so, she positions herself (unequivocally) as 'mother'; or 'total mother'. As the post continues, Nonie acknowledges that this self-positioning negatively aligns with previous posters who are reluctant to adopt the subject position 'total mother', or even 'mother'. Her use of anticipatory double-voiced discourse (Baxter, 2014) in lines 4-5 anticipates potential criticism of her self-positioning as a 'total mother': 'I know for some people that would be a dreadful thought'. She goes on to address this predicted evaluation of her position as 'dreadful' by emphasising her agency ('what I want') and satisfaction ('fulfilled') in line 5. She qualifies these claims with the strengthening adverb 'exactly', which adds certainty and precision to her claim that this is what she wants, and 'incredibly', which further intensifies her claim to being 'fulfilled'. By using this emphatic language, together with the emphatic statements of lines 1 and 2, Nonie responds to this predicted criticism/ negative alignment with other posters by over-emphasising her positive evaluation of her own position. In this way, whilst seeming to accept this

negative alignment, she also encourages positive alignment by defending her position in persuasive terms.

Despite the implication that the subject position 'mother' is absolutely central to Nonie's ability to position herself as a 'complete' person, Nonie does draw on the theme of individuality as her post continues. In lines 3-5, for example, Nonie actually emphasises her individual choice, agency and control. Nonie is the agent in the active, unmitigated clauses 'I have chosen' (line 3) and 'I'm doing exactly what I want' (line 5). In these constructions, Nonie is not passively positioned by the 'mother' role, but actively and willingly takes it up, and all it involves.

Appendix P. 'Child centricity' in 'Your identity as a mother'

The 'child centricity' theme, more than any of the other three prominent themes/potential discourses I explore in detail, aquires a 'commonsense legitimacy' (Ellece, 2012) in the thread because it is very rarely questioned or resisted: it is generally taken for granted that posters love their children, care for them and put them first. In post 23, for example, ▮▮▮▮▮ (henceforth 'Queen') positions her son (DS) at the centre of her life, emphasises the personal sacrifices she makes in her commitment to him and evaluates their relationship in positive terms:

▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

1. It was DS's birthday yesterday, so I was taking stock of life. I always do when that
2. date comes around!

3. I am still very bound up in being a mum although that role is now more about
4. promoting self reliance and supporting his independent skills. There is now a greater
5. balance of give and are [sic] between DS and I, I enjoy his company and we do things
6. together that we love. However, I am still astonished at times that I give up so much
7. time to encourage his interests (hours at the edge of a rugby pitch, early mornings at
8. a swimming pool) and I can only assume that this is pure maternal love!

Queen's positioning of her son at the centre of her life is indicated through her use of the inclusive pronoun 'we' (lines 5 and 6) to present them as interrelated individuals whose interests and needs are closely matched. The 'balance' metaphor of line 5, together with the complementary pair 'give and [take]' adds to this sense of interrelation and equality. In lines 4-6, Queen makes her positive evaluation of the relationship between herself and her son explicit through her use of the positive affective verbs 'enjoy' and love'. Through these linguistic choices, Queen consistently positions herself in relation to her son, as one part of a mother and son 'unit'.

In the latter part of post 23, Queen departs from this co-positioning of herself in relation to her son in order to emphasise her commitment to her son. Her use of the contrastive conjunction 'however' marks her awareness that this is a departure from her earlier stance, which implies equality and mutual interest. Queen continues to position her son at the centre of her life but from lines 6-8 she makes it explicit that she puts her child's needs before her own, as indicated through her use of the verbal phrase 'give up' in line 6. She also suggests that she goes to extreme lengths in her commitment to her son, using the intensifying qualifiers 'so much' to emphasise the amount of 'time' she has given. She goes on to specify this amount, with the potentially limitless time descriptor 'hours' (line 7) and 'early mornings', with the adjective 'early' pointing to the extreme nature of her commitment.

Queen also suggests in this post that child-centred behaviour is involuntary and instinctive. For example, In lines 6-8, Queen expresses surprise at, and lack of understanding of, her own action of 'giv[ing] up so much time' to encourage her son's interests. She prefaces this action with the subordinate clause 'I am still astonished at times' (line 6). Queen later attributes her behaviour to 'pure maternal love' (line 8), but again mitigates her explanation with the subordinate clause 'I can only assume'. Both qualifying clauses draw attention to her lack of understanding of her own actions and mark these statements as subjective interpretations. The adverb 'only' (line 8) suggests that 'assumptions' are all she can make, in the absence of any rational explanation.

Queen's claim to be surprised at her own actions implies that her behaviour is 'automatic' or 'instinctive' rather than conscious. Her use of the adjective 'pure' further alludes to the instinctive nature of her actions. The adverbs 'always' (line 1) and 'still' (line 6) suggest that her commitment to her son is ongoing. In line 6 Queen implies that it is the ongoing nature of this commitment in

particular that is surprising, alluding to a common sentiment in the thread that being 'completely' child-centred, or 'totally' mother, is only acceptable for parents of roughly pre-school age children.

Queen's attribution of her behaviour to an unknown force can be read as an unwillingness to identify herself as a conscious or willing actor of these selfless acts. In this way she presents her actions as 'instinctive', and therefore inevitable and 'commonsense'. It could also be indicative of resistance to the 'child-centricity' theme and/or the closely related 'total mother' theme, demonstrating an uncertainty about the acceptability of positioning herself as a 'total' mother who puts her children before herself, to the detriment of her own sense of 'self' and individuality. This points to a tension between the selflessness associated with the 'child-centricity' theme and the emphasis on individualism and choice within the 'individualism' theme that runs through the thread.

The 'common-sense legitimacy' of the 'child-centricity' theme in this thread is further reinforced through participants' certain and unmitigated expression of strong, positive feelings about their children and willingness to put them first. Positive feelings towards children are presented as *extreme* using a range of linguistic strategies throughout the thread. Adjectival and adverbial choices often serve to intensify both the positive attributes of children and participants' positive feelings towards them. In the following extract from post 52, for example, ██████ uses the intensifiers 'totally', 'amazing' and 'utterly':

The hugs and cuddles are totally worth it and my amazing DC make me utterly proud to be their Mum.

██████) similarly, uses 'amazing' and 'wonderful' in post

However, the other side to this is how proud I am when she does something amazing, knowing I have nurtured and taught this wonderful funny child all by myself.

The certainty of participants' alignment with the 'child-centricity' theme in these examples, compared with the relative uncertainty and contradictions of participants' self-positioning in relation to the themes of 'individuality' and 'total motherhood', suggests this is a theme that, within this thread at least, has some 'common-sense legitimacy'.

The relative confidence with which many participants express alignment with 'child-centricity' compared with, for example, 'total motherhood', can also be seen in the following example, where ██████ resists being positioned within the 'total motherhood' theme but embraces the 'child-centricity' theme:

██████

1. I was actually surprised how much I *didn't* change when I became a mum, four years
2. ago. It's like 'mum' became an additional thing rather than replacing who I already
3. was, if that makes sense. But we have only one child and my DH has always done as
4. much as me, which I think makes it less all-encompassing.

5. I don't think 'mum' is a huge part of my identity really. I love my son fiercely, but I
6. don't really feel defined by my relationship to him. It is an important part but there
7. are other parts too.

██████ (The author's) resistance of the 'total mother' subject position is characterised by mitigation and uncertainty. For example, she repeatedly uses subjective expressions of stance to cast her statements as opinion and personal conjecture, using 'I think' (line 4), 'I don't think' (line 5), and 'I don't really feel' (lines 5-6). In the latter example, she also mitigates her statement using the adverb 'really'. The same adverb is used in line 5, to further mitigate her statement 'I don't

think 'mum' is a huge part of my identity'. These linguistic devices point to a careful negotiation of the 'total motherhood' theme, where ████████ (the author) resists being positioned as a 'total' mother but is careful not to completely reject the subject position 'mum'.

████████ (The author) positions herself more unproblematically within the 'child-centricity' theme, for example through her statement 'I love my son fiercely'. This example is markedly different in style from the rest of her post. It is sandwiched between two heavily mitigated clauses, both including 'really' to diminish the force of the statement, and the subjective markers of stance 'I don't think'/ 'I don't really feel' to mark them out clearly as personal opinion. By contrast, 'I love my son fiercely' is an emphatic and direct, unmitigated statement. The adverb 'fiercely' is suggestive of violence and extremity, pointing to the intensity of this participant's love for her child. 'Fiercely' is also a term usually associated with wild animals, suggesting perhaps that this emotion is uncontrollable, instinctive and all-consuming. The directness of her claim and her adverbial choice can also be said to mark the 'child-centricity' theme, and in particular, love for children, as 'instinctive' and commonsense. The force of ████████ (the author's) statement of love for her child distinguishes her assertive stance in relation to the 'child-centricity' theme from her problematic stance in relation to the 'total motherhood' theme.

Appendix Q. 'Individuality' and 'total motherhood': Convergence and competition in 'Your identity as a mother'

In post 13, ████████ (the author) sets the themes of 'individuality' and 'total motherhood' in opposition, making a claim to individuality largely through emphatic resistance to being categorised as 'mum'.

████████

1. Hate being identified as " mum".
2. I was a person before I became a mum and that person still exists.being a mum is
3. 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 Dcs would say "
5. and how are you today, mum?"
6. I have a name!!!! I am a person!!

████████ (The author) begins her post with the explicitly evaluative 'hate'; her elision of the subject 'I' means that this verb is placed in the initial position of this sentence, adding to its negative force. Through this immediate negative evaluation, ████████ (the author) rejects the subject position 'mum' in favour of a more individualistic subject position; the 'I' introduced in line 2. Her delayed use of 'I' in the subject-initial position gives force to the personal pronoun when she does use it in line 2, after rejecting the subject position 'mum'. By placing 'mum' in inverted commas (line 1), ████████ frames this subject position as a role; an externally imposed construction that is distanced from herself as a 'person'. The use of inverted commas here could also be seen to mark reported speech, suggesting that it is *others* who subject-position her as a 'mum', not herself. ████████ initial use of "mum" in line 1, then, can be described as double-voiced discourse; the term does not come from her own 'voice', but the 'voice' of others who position her in this way. This double-voiced discourse serves to *distinguish* (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005) her from those 'others' who subject-position her in this way.

In lines 4-5, ████████ gives an example of a specific 'other', the 'nursery worker' quoted here who positions her as 'mum'. ████████ again uses the verb 'hate' to negatively evaluate this 'nursery worker' (line 4), as well as the negative label 'silly bint' (line 4). Through this negative evaluation, she again rejects the subject position 'mum' and negatively aligns with this nursery worker. The jovial greeting attributed to this nursery worker in line 5 further distinguishes her from ████████ whose discourse, by contrast, is marked by negative evaluation and emphatic, unmitigated statement.

In line 3, ████████ (the author) does qualify her self-positioning as 'mum', claiming that it is a 'part' of her identity, and a part that is insignificant, as suggested by her use of the intensifier 'just' and the tautological addition 'not the whole'. But the prepositional phrase in line 2 'before I became a mum' is not qualified. ████████ (The author's) apparently contradictory self-positioning, then, points to the dominance and pervasiveness of the subject-position 'mum'; she does not succeed in resisting it absolutely. This at the same time both contradicts and further draws attention to her illegitimation of this subject position, by illustrating the difficulty of making self-reference without taking it up.

A number of posts by the participant ████████ combine the themes of 'individuality' and 'total motherhood'. Like ████████, at times she sets the themes in opposition, rejecting a subject position as 'mum' in favour of a subject position as an 'individual'. Nevertheless, she, like ████████, also frequently positions herself as a 'mum'. What becomes apparent in many of her posts is a self-positioning that is ambivalent and constantly shifting. This can be seen in post 29, reproduced here in full:

1. I'm different from the person I was before I had DD but... I don't know, I don't think I
2. do feel that my identity has changed. I don't feel like "mum". I feel like me - I just

3. happen to have a DC now. Having her has changed how I feel about life and my
4. priorities immensely, of course, but I certainly don't feel like a different person. I do
5. still work f/t, I don't know if that has impact on it. Perhaps it has. I know that
6. personally I would be less happy if I was a SAHM, so no doubt that would have
7. changed how I felt about my identity. But because I still spend a lot of time doing
8. What I did before I had DD there hasn't been a massive sea change. I just no longer

9. get to sit on my arse and devour box sets when I get home from work 😁

10. But I actually feel like it is the things that are tangential to being a mother, the
11. effects that having a DC have had on my life, that have changed who I am more
12. than simply being a mother. I have moved, made new friends, have a drastically
13. different social life than I did before. The change to my relationships with my friends
14. has changed who I am as a person.

15. But being "mum" has just been a bolt-on to my identity before I had her. You know
16. how people say when you have another DC you don't love your other DC less, you
17. find more room for love? I think of it like that. Before I had DD I was Thurlow. Now I
18. am Thurlow + DD.

19. I don't know if that has made any sense, I'm struggling to put it into words. But
20. essentially no, being a mum hasn't changed my perception of who I am. I'm now
21. me *and* a mum.

████████ (The author's) self-positioning changes as her post progresses. In the first paragraph, she distances herself from the subject position 'mum'/ 'mother'. Like ████████, she uses inverted commas – "mum", framing this role as a construction that is external to herself, imposed upon her, and perhaps, like ████████ , alluding to *others'* subject-positioning of her as 'mum'. ████████ doesn't refer to herself as a 'mum' in this paragraph, instead using the phrase 'before I had DD' in line 1, and 'I just happen to have a DC' in line 3. Like ████████, ████████ sets up an opposition between the two subject positions, exemplified in her juxtaposition of the contrasting clauses 'I don't feel like "mum", I feel like me'. But as the post goes on, ████████ does position herself as mum/ mother more than once, for example through her use of the relational process 'being a mother' in lines 10 and 12.

After categorising herself as a mum/ mother, ████████ renegotiates what being "mum" means in relation to her identity. In the first paragraph, ████████ creates an opposition between 'mum' and 'me', but in the third paragraph she suggests that she can be both; that her identity can be split into 'parts': 'mum' can be added on to 'me': 'being "mum" has just been a bolt-on to my identity before I had her'. ████████ (The author) diminishes the significance of this new 'part' of herself through her use of 'just' and also 'bolt-on', which is suggestive of something that is not essential, can be easily attached and removed again. Whilst acknowledging that 'mum' is a part of her, then, her linguistic choices still work to minimise the significance of this new 'part'; 'me' is positioned as the central, immovable identity onto which other aspects can be attached. The final line of her post, 'I'm now me *and* a mum, further suggests that she can adopt *both* subject positions, and presents them both as equally valued.

Post 29 is characterised by epistemic stance markers such as 'know', 'think' and 'feel', which work to mitigate ████████ (the author's) claims to individuality, or her rejection of 'being a mum', by suggesting that these statements are 'just' her personal impressions. Her repeated use of the epistemic stance marker 'I know' with a negative ('I don't know'), for example in lines 1, 5 and 7, also works to mitigate her claims and points to her uncertainty in positioning herself either as an individual, as a mother, or as both. ████████ acknowledges her uncertainty about her ability to adequately express her self-positioning in the last paragraph of her post, which mitigates her entire post with the words 'I don't know if that has made any sense, I'm struggling to put it into words'.

Both ▮▮▮▮▮ and ▮▮▮▮▮ negotiate their self-positioning in relation to the themes of 'total motherhood' and 'individuality' by suggesting that their identities can be divided into parts. For example, ▮▮▮▮▮ (post 29, line 15) uses the phrase 'being "mum" has just been a bolt-on to my identity before I had her' and ▮▮▮▮▮ (post 13, lines 2-3) states that 'being a mum is just a part of who I am, not the whole'. ▮▮▮▮▮ (henceforth 'Lion'), similarly, constructs her identity in 'parts':

▮▮▮▮▮

'I am not ashamed to be partly defined as a mum!'

Lion's bald declaration, punctuated with an exclamation mark, points to an emphatic self-positioning within the 'total motherhood' theme. But the enthusiasm and directness of her statement is somewhat at odds with the mitigating adverb 'partly'. By using this qualifier, Lion resists the subject position of a 'total' mum and the consequent implication that motherhood has completely taken over 'who she is'. By claiming that she is 'not ashamed' to be partly defined as 'mum', Lion points to the possibility that she *could*, or perhaps even feels she *should,* be ashamed to do so. The implied negative connotations of 'defining as a mum' may also explain Lion's mitigation of her claim with the adverb 'partly'. Like many participants, Lion carefully negotiates her position so as not to exclusively position herself within one theme.

The themes of 'total motherhood' and 'individuality' are not always set in opposition. For example, in post 75, ▮▮▮▮▮ (henceforth 'Nonie') positions herself firmly within the theme of 'total motherhood' *and* emphasises her individuality and agency:

▮▮▮▮▮

1. Being a mother was all I ever wanted to be. I felt like a shadow of a person before.
2. Raising my children is by far the most important thing in my life. There are lots of
3. hobbies and activities I want to do, but I have chosen to put them off until my
4. children are a lot older and need me less. I know for some people that would be a
5. dreadful thought, but I'm doing exactly what I want and am incredibly fulfilled by it.

▮▮▮▮▮ (henceforth 'Nonie') subject-positions herself using the relational process 'being a mother' right at the start of her post. In this way, she aligns herself completely with the role 'mother', presenting it as *who she is* and also framing her entire post in terms of this relation. Nonie's statement 'Being a mother was all I ever wanted to be' is suggestive of an absolute investment in motherhood that goes beyond the temporary status of 'having children'. Her use of the present participle 'being', together with the intensifying qualifiers 'all' and 'ever', suggests that her self-positioning in relation to motherhood is ongoing; that she has *always* positioned herself in relation to motherhood and this continues to be an ongoing influence in her life. This statement alludes to themes that position *all women* in relation to motherhood, to motherhood as compulsory for women; a life goal or ambition. These themes are captured in my stage 1 analysis in nodes such as 'mother as whole woman' and 'your only purpose as a woman is to give birth'. Related themes have been named as discourses, for example the 'compulsory motherhood' discourse named by Ellece (2013).

By positioning the relational clause 'being a mother' at the start of this sentence and the pronoun 'I' within the adjectival clause 'all I ever wanted to be', Nonie places herself in a passive position, de-emphasising her own agency by implying that her 'personhood' exists only through her self-positioning as a 'mother'. In this way, Nonie not only positions herself as a mother, but also creates the impression that she is positioned *by* motherhood. The emphatic nature of this construction also suggesting that this is a statement of fact, rather than an expression of her wants and desires. The opening sentence of line 2 has a similar structure, as shown below:

Being a mother was all I ever wanted to be
Raising my children is by far the most important thing in my life

In the second example, Nonie places the process 'raising my children' in subject-initial position and again does not position herself as an actor in this process. This again has the effect of positioning her in relation to her role as a mother; or rather the process of 'raising her children', and also of making this statement bald and emphatic. Nonie's use of the superlative 'most', further modified and intensified by the prepositional phrase 'by far', expresses the importance of 'raising her children' in her life as similarly absolute. The similarity between these sentences suggests that, for Nonie, 'total motherhood' and 'child-centricity' are very much intertwined.

As her post continues, Nonie acknowledges that her self-positioning as 'mother', or even 'total mother', implies negative alignment with previous contributors who are reluctant to adopt these subject positions. Her use of double-voiced discourse (Baxter, 2014) in lines 4-5 anticipates potential criticism of her self-positioning as a 'total mother': 'I know for some people that would be a dreadful thought'. She goes on to address this predicted evaluation of her position as 'dreadful' by emphasising her agency ('what I want') and satisfaction ('fulfilled') in line 5. She qualifies these claims with the strengthening adverb 'exactly', which adds certainty and precision to her claim that this is what she wants, and 'incredibly', which further intensifies her claim to being 'fulfilled'. By using this emphatic language, together with the emphatic statements of lines 1 and 2, Nonie responds to this predicted criticism by over-emphasising her positive evaluation of her own position, defending it in persuasive terms.

Nonie's juxtaposition of her past (line 1) and present (lines 2 and 5) feelings further emphasises her feeling of 'fulfilment' through contrast. Her statement that she 'felt like a shadow of a person before' points to a void; the paradoxical metaphor of a self that exists only as a shadow suggests an absence of 'selfhood' or being. The time preposition 'before' draws attention to the comparison. By contrast, her use of the phrases 'exactly what I want' and 'incredibly fulfilled' in relation to the present point to control and a feeling of wholeness. The verb 'fulfilled' contrasts with the 'shadow' metaphor in its implication of solidity and form. The implication is that without the 'mother' role, Nonie lacks solid human form; she is not a whole 'person'. These opposing descriptions further emphasise Nonie's total and willing self-positioning as 'mother'.

Despite the implication that the subject position 'mother' is absolutely central to Nonie's sense of 'self', Nonie does draw on the theme of individuality as her post continues. In lines 3-5, for example, Nonie emphasises her individual choice, agency and control. Nonie is the agent in the active, unmitigated clauses 'I have chosen' (line 3) and 'I'm doing exactly what I want' (line 5). In these constructions, Nonie is not passively positioned by the 'mother' role, but actively and willingly takes it up, and all it involves.

In post 57, ███████ (henceforth 'MrsP') also positions herself as a 'total mother', but by contrast with Nonie's post, emphasises her *lack* of choice, agency and control, framing 'Mum' as an externally imposed, rather than personally chosen, subject position. In this post, MrsP creates a sense that being positioned as a 'total mother' has effectively worked to erase her identity as an 'individual', suggesting again that 'total motherhood' is a powerful, dominant theme in this context; one that is incredibly difficult to resist, to adopt a subject position outside of.

████████

1. Right now I don't feel like I have an identity at all, other than as Mum. DCs are almost
2. 3yrs, and 10mo. I actually don't even know who I am any more.

MrsP's reluctance to embrace the subject position 'Mum' is conveyed by tagging the qualifier 'other than as Mum' to the end of her sentence, marking it as an aside; an afterthought. This qualifier dismisses the subject position 'mum' as something of no consequence or importance; as *not* central to Mrs P's sense of 'identity'. Her lack of identification with the role implies that it has been externally imposed; not something she has chosen or embraced.

Though MrsP attempts to position herself as an individual through her repeated use of the first-person pronoun 'I', she also suggests that this 'I' has been erased by the subject position 'Mum', without which she *has* no 'identity'; this is the only subject position available to her. She emphasises this claim to a lack of personhood through her use of the emphatic qualifiers 'at all' (line 1) and 'even' (line 2), which frame her own 'not knowing' who she is as unexpected and unwanted, suggesting she is taken aback by the loss of self she has experienced. Though she positions herself as 'mum', then, her implicitly negative evaluation of this position implies a negative alignment with posters such as Nonie who embraces this subject position, positioning herself more unproblematically as a 'child-centred', 'total mother'.

MrsP's emphasis of her lack of 'personhood' echoes Nonie's claim that before she became a mother she was a 'shadow of a person', but MrsP evaluates her new-found position in much more negative terms than Nonie. Like Nonie, she uses a preposition ('any more', line 2; cf Nonie's 'before', line 1) to draw attention to the contrast between the past and the present. But whereas Nonie draws attention to her *past* lack of 'personhood', MrsP draws attention to her *current* lack of 'personhood'; her use of 'any more' in the sentence 'I actually don't even know who I am any more' implies that she once *did* know 'who she was', but this subject position has now been muted, erased or censored. Like Crazym, then, MrsP illegitimates the 'mum' subject position by drawing attention to the way her own sense of 'self' has been erased by the imposed 'mum' subject position.

The closing statement of MrsP's post can also be compared with a similar expression from Nonie's post. The parallels between the two statements can be seen clearly in this diagraph:

I am the least important person in my own life (MrsP, post 66, line 7)
Raising my children is by far the most important thing in my life (None, post 75)

Where Nonie uses the positive superlative 'most (important thing in my life)', MrsP uses the negative superlative 'least (important person in my own life)'. Where Nonie places the verb phrase relating to her children in the initial position of her sentence, and explicitly claims 'ownership' of her children using the possessive 'my' (revealing her focus on her children), MrsP places herself in the initial position, using the personal pronoun 'I' (revealing her focus on herself). This comparison again draws attention to Nonie's unproblematic self-positioning as a 'child-centred', 'total mother' and positive evaluation of this stance, whereas MrsP contests this position, negatively evaluating this stance and seeking to position herself as an 'individual'.

Appendix R. Total motherhood, child-centricity and individuality in post 66 and post 59

In post 66, the potential discourses 'child-centricity' and 'total motherhood' seem to merge, as █████████ equates total devotion to her children with her role as a 'good mum' and debates whether this role is all that matters in her life.

... ██████

1. At the moment I am filled with the overwhelming sense that I just don't matter. It
2. doesn't matter if I come on my period and am bleeding heavily and just want to take
3. two minutes in the bathroom by myself. It doesn't matter if something I want to hear
4. has come on the news. It doesn't matter if I've had a shit night's sleep. I have tried to
5. talk to DH* about it but he just doesn't get it. Last night he responded with "but you're
6. a good mum, and that's what's important." Just completely compounded and
7. confirmed everything I'm feeling. I am the least important person in my own life.

*DH: darling husband

In this extract, MrsP both reproduces and challenges the potential discourse of 'child-centricity' by presenting her own needs as small and insignificant and at the same time presenting her failure to meet them as unreasonable and unfair. She does this, for example, through her use of the intensifier 'just', along with the precise and small amount of time specified in the phrase 'two minutes' (line 2).

MrsP implies her self-neglect as a result of being 'child-centred' is severe and extreme. For example, her direct reference to the 'bleeding' she experiences whilst menstruating (a topic that is often euphemised) in line 2 brings with it associations of injury and violence, intensified by the adverb 'heavily'. Similarly, her use of the expletive 'shit', a taboo expression, in line 4 emphasises the seriousness of the consequences to her personal life and well-being.

MrsP's emphasis of her lack of 'personhood' echoes Nonie's claim in post 75 that before she became a mother she was a 'shadow of a person', but MrsP evaluates her new-found position in much more negative terms than Nonie. Like Nonie, she uses a preposition ('any more', line 2; cf Nonie's 'before', line 1) to draw attention to the contrast between the past and the present. But whereas Nonie draws attention to her past *lack* of 'personhood', MrsP draws attention to her *current* lack of 'personhood'; her use of 'any more' in the sentence 'I actually don't even know who I am any more' implies that she once *did* know 'who she was', but this subject position has now been muted, erased or censored. Like ██████ , then, MrsP illegitimates the 'mum' subject position by drawing attention to the way her own sense of 'self' has been erased by the imposed 'mum' subject position.

MrsP's final statement 'I am the least important person in my own life' is framed by a tone of negativity and injustice. Her statement can be contrasted with a similar expression by Nonie who, by contrast, happily positions herself within the child-centricity theme: 'Raising my children is by far the most important thing in my life' (██████ , post 75). Where Nonie uses the positive superlative 'most (important thing in my life)', MrsP uses the negative superlative 'least (important person in my own life)'. Where Nonie places the verb phrase relating to her children in the initial position of her sentence, and explicitly claims 'ownership' of her children using the possessive 'my' (revealing her focus on her children), MrsP places herself in the initial position, using the personal pronoun 'I' (revealing her focus on herself). MrsP's feeling that her situation is inexplicable and illogical is conveyed through the apparently contradictory nature of her final sentence, further emphasised through her use of the double possessive '*my own* life'.

In post 59, ██████ challenges the 'women are defined [exclusively] in relation to children' discourse in its 'extreme' form and resists the 'child-centred', 'total mother' subject position it offers

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partly *through* her attribution of this discourse to a group who can be seen to represent 'figures' of this discourse.

████████

1. **[tagged quote from post 37 – removed]**

2. This is very interesting as an older pregnant woman (through medical necessity not choice,
3. which might have a bearing on my own perceptions) who is one of the last of her peers to
4. have a DC*.

5. I almost notice from the "outside" looking in that some *do* have a certain way - e.g. a
6. book/movement/lieftyle- of parenting that they define themselves by: but it's almost like
7. being part of a tribe, rather than inherently to do with being a mum IYSWIM**? Lots of
8. judgement and looking at the way other people do things and defining by the binary
9. opposite.

10. Can you guess some have been a PITA*** already lecturing me (good mums don't,
11. apparently, wear make-up: that money/time could be spent on PFB****).

12. Interestingly one of the most devoted mum in terms of practical things and passionate
13. adoration of PFB I know (of child with a disability requiring lots of care and special input) is
14. very much - and vocally - her "own woman" *with* her child by her side IYSWIM.

15. I'm actually a bit terrified of the "if you have any time for yourself you're neglectful"
16. brigade. As I mentioned above, if anything I'll end up accidentally attached or just spoil

17. PFB <u>due</u> to PFB being a bit of a miracle... but I would like to be *allowed* to be me.   ☺

*darling children
**if you see what I mean
***pain in the ass/arse
****precious first born

████████ (The author) uses a range of strategies to negatively evaluate this group and thereby resist this dominant discourse. For example, the category 'the "if you have any time for yourself you're neglectful" brigade' suggests that this group's authority is unwarranted and misplaced. This reported speech is framed by a claim that she is 'a bit terrified' of this group. The verb 'terrified' positions her as powerless and subordinate to a dominant 'other', but also negatively evaluates that 'other', reinforcing the implication that they are unreasonable and extreme. Within this reported speech, the group's labelling of individuals as 'neglectful' if they fail to meet certain 'conditions' is also presented as unreasonable, because the act of having 'any time for yourself' is disproportionate to the accusation of 'neglect'. ████████ (The author's) use of the qualifier 'any' in this clause emphasises this disparity and presents the group's demands, again, as extreme and unreasonable. Her use of 'brigade' here, like her earlier 'tribe' (line 7), implies that the group is large in size, expert in their field and potentially hostile or combative. But, like 'lecturing', the category 'brigade', used outside of a combative context, can also carry implications of unwanted or misplaced force. The similar label 'tribe' implies this is a closed group that constructs itself as separate from others. categorisations of this group, then, work to negatively evaluate them and position them as 'other': an 'out-group'.

In the final lines of ████████ (the author's) post, however, ████████ (the author) self-positioning is not so different from the subject-positioning she seems to resist through her negative evaluation of this 'out-group'. For example, the verb 'attached' works to position her in exclusive relation to her child. So, too, does her repetition of the category 'PFB' (precious first born), first attributed in line 11 to the voice of an 'other'. The evaluative qualifier 'precious' not only positively evaluates the child being categorised here, but also the parent, as 'doting' or 'devoted' for describing them in this way. By taking up *both* the 'individuality' and 'women are defined in relation to children' discourses, she suggests that she is not controlled; her subjectivity is not 'fixed' by either.

A dominant use of first person singular pronouns and an absence of plural second person pronouns that reference the poster and a male carer (such as 'we'), or singular second person masculine pronouns that reference a male carer (such as 'he') is common in many posts to this thread, including post 86, which is conspicuous for its complete absence of male actors: every actor in this post appears to be female. This participant has daughters, who play with other 'girls'; she herself socialises with their 'mums'. This complete absence of men works to suggest that bringing up children is a *feminine* activity, creating a vivid impression of a network of women, supporting each other in bringing up their children:

▬▬▬▬▬

1. I'm either mum or miss.

2. I teach, when the DC* were little, I worked very part time (as little as 0.4 at points)
3. but now DC are older, I'm starting to get my career back on track. I've taken on more
4. responsibility at work, and am managing more areas again (I was 28 when I had
5. children, and had responsibility before having DC, but gave that up when I went part
6. time). Now, I'm starting to do more, and am enjoying the new challenges (although it
7. has been completely knackering this last year). Teaching is very much a vocation for
8. me, and I think because it is all consuming, it does become very wrapped up in your
9. identity.

10. But when I'm not working, I'm either with my kids or doing things for them. I'm
11. taking them to their training, or to competitions, or I'm having days out with other
12. girls the DDs** play with and their mums. After work and the girls, I have very little
13. time left. When I do socialise, most of my friends have DC, so I go out with mums.
14. For example, my NCT*** friends, the mums from school or hobbies etc. Even my old
15. school friend from primary has DC the same age as my DC and we're godparents to
16. each other's children.

17. There's very little I do that's not connected to my work or my children. But I'm

18. happy with that. 😁
*DC: darling children
**DDs: darling daughters
***NCT: national childbirth trust

However, several participants *do* reference male actors, for example through the use of the inclusive pronoun 'we', third-person singular 'he' and also the acronyms 'DH' (darling husband) and 'DP' (darling partner), as in the following extracts:

▬▬▬▬▬

1. I was actually surprised how much I *didn't* change when I became a mum, four years
2. ago. It's like 'mum' became an additional thing rather than replacing who I already
3. was, if that makes sense. But **we** have only one child and my **DH*** has always done as
4. much as me, which I think makes it less all-encompassing.

▬▬▬▬▬

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

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

7. I'm of course a mum at home but **DP***** does equal amounts of parenting and between
8. **us we** allow **each other** to do **our** own things (so I play for a sports team, do stuff
9. the NCT****, and regularly organise a meal out with my girlfriends; **he**'s training for a

10. sport thing and also meets **his** friend about an ongoing project). **We** also try and
11. have a date night or some time on **our** own once in a while. DS has changed **us**, but
12. only priorities, rather than **us** as people.

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

*DH: darling husband
**DS: darling son
***DP: darling partner
****NCT: national childbirth trust

The acronyms DH (darling husband) and DP (darling partner) used in these examples position men in relation to the participants; as husbands or partners. Both categories imply the relationship is stable and lasting. The inclusion of the adjective 'darling' in this acronym is a particular quirk of interaction on the Mumsnet 'talk' forum. Though some choose the terms 'husband' or 'partner' over 'dh' or 'dp', the acronyms are more common, in this thread and across the forum. The acronyms are an established 'shorthand' and so it is likely not always a conscious choice to use the affix the adjective 'darling' to the category 'husband/partner'. But whether the addition of the adjective 'darling' is chosen consciously or not, it carries a positive evaluation. By using these acronyms, then, participants position themselves as loving and devoted wives or partners in a happy and stable environment (though there are moments in the data set at which the qualifier 'd' for 'darling' seems to be used ironically). The use of these acronyms across Mumsnet 'talk' establishes this stance as the 'norm'. ████████ use of the label 'DP' is consistent with her description of her partner and their relationship. She emphasises the love and stability of this relationship further through reference to the things they do together in lines 10-11. ████████ (The author's) use of the verb 'try' suggests it is not a straightforward task to organise this time together, therefore implying that they put a good deal of effort into 'making time' for each other. Her use of the time preposition 'once in a while' also adds to the impression that there are pressures on their time and that it takes effort to maintain this loving relationship.

Though ████████ responds to the 'remit' set out in the opening post by focusing on herself and how/ whether motherhood has changed her, she persistently makes her partner relevant to this exploration and presents them as a unit with equal parental roles. The opening line of ████████ post includes three first person singular pronouns. But she balances this focus on self through reference to her partner, who she introduces indirectly through the use of the pronoun 'we', in line 2. This pattern of alternating a focus on the self with a focus on her 'DP', herself *and* her 'DP' as a 'couple' (and also their child) continues throughout ████████ post. By making her 'DP' relevant to her response, she suggests that 'having children', and the effect this has had on her, has not just been a one-way relationship between her and her child: it has also involved her partner. In this way, ████████ not only makes her male partner *relevant* to this interaction, but also attempts to position him as an *equal parent.*

The third paragraph of post 11 follows a similar pattern to the first: ████████ begins by focusing on herself 'as a mum' and using the first person pronoun 'I' (line 7). As before, however, she follows this reference to self with a reference to herself and her DP as a 'unit' through the use of inclusive pronouns ('us', 'we', 'each other', 'our'). In line 7, her use of the term 'equal' makes her positioning of herself and her partner as equals explicit. ████████ does continue to make successful attempts to position herself and her 'DP' as equal partners, however. For example, not only does she use inclusive pronouns, but she also uses prepositions that position them in close relation to each other ('between us', 'each other' – lines 7-8). She goes on to list the 'things' that they allow each other to do, and in doing so presents them each as separate actors: 'I' and 'he' (lines 8-10), emphasising their individuality. Her use of syntactically similar sentences, however, again emphasises the equality between them:

I play for a sports team
He's training for a sport thing
(I) regularly organise a meal out with my girlfriends;
(he) meets his friend about an ongoing project.

After listing their separate activities, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ brings herself and her partner together as a stable 'unit' who act jointly through her use again of inclusive pronouns ('we', 'our', 'us' and 'people', lines 10-12).

In the second post to this thread, ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ , too, introduces a male actor, her 'dh' (darling husband), and positions him as an *equal* parent.

▮▮▮▮▮▮▮

During work, my identity is mostly bound up in my role there.

At home, I parent alongside dh*.
*dh: darling husband

▮▮▮▮▮▮ (The author's) use of the preposition 'alongside' implies joint, equal sharing of parental activities herself and her 'dh'. ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (The author) therefore challenges the remit of the OP again by making her partner relevant to her exploration of her identity as a 'mother', and by foregrounding her position as one of two parents with equal responsibilities. ▮▮▮▮▮▮ presents her 'home' life as not just about *her* as an individual, or as a woman, then, but about herself and her husband, as 'equal' parents.

When ▮▮▮▮▮ introduces her 'home' life in line 2, she uses the gender-neutral verb 'parent', foregrounding the activities she is involved with rather than her subjectivity, in the same way that ▮▮▮▮▮▮ positions her husband as someone who undertakes parental activities, rather than as a 'parent' or 'father'. In this way, ▮▮▮▮▮ resists ▮▮▮▮▮▮ agenda to explore her 'identity', challenging the way the OP frames 'motherhood' as the likely 'totalising' influence in her life and rejecting the *gendered* terminology used by ▮▮▮▮▮▮ .

Appendix T. In-group construction in a 'significant moment' from 'Your identity as a mother'

In the following examples, ██████████ uses double-voiced discourse (Baxter, 2014), bringing a range of 'voices' into her post, therefore offering multiple readings of her statements, inviting the reader to jointly collaborate in the construction of the 'out-group' and positioning them on the same 'side'; as part of an 'in-group':

In other circumstances I would wonder whether someone who decided so deliberately to define themselves but one characteristic or belief was unsure of themselves (lines 5-6)

I suspect - crap cod-psychology here… That might be completely
wrong but sometimes it is the impression I get - I am right, I AM! (lines 8-10)

These are not the voices of 'others' in this instance, but different realisations of her own voice: her 'hypothetical' voice, a theorisation of her response in 'other circumstances', her 'doubting voice', which anticipates her reader's response that her theory may be 'crap' or 'completely wrong' and her 'confident' voice – 'I am right, I AM!'. By drawing on so many voices, ██████████ offers multiple readings of her statements, inviting the reader to jointly collaborate in the construction of the 'out-group' and positioning them on the same 'side'; as part of 'in-group'.

Retrieved from

Mother's Day Reflections

Posted on March 30, 2014by jaimack

I've been thinking a lot this week about what motherhood 'means' to me.

My research rests on the assumption that motherhood is *a construction.* Many of us (including, until recently, me) assume the forces which drive mothers to behave in a particular way are powered by, most significantly, nature, instincts, or moral 'responsibilities'. If you're a mum, you've probably heard people say 'it's natural to feel that way'… 'follow your instincts'… or 'you'll know the right thing to do'. But, I will argue, a lot of the time what we see as being 'natural' or 'right' is a social construction. 'Motherhood' is built on a complex and powerful set of ideas, values or guiding principles, set down layer upon layer over centuries, building powerful traditions and moral doctrines. The result is what we might call an 'ideology' of motherhood.

If you've seen Slavoj Zizek's film 'The Pervert's Guide to Ideology', you'll know that he finds a great way of showing how ideologies affect the way we perceive the world. He takes his inspiration from the 1988 Hollywood film 'They Live', in which a homeless man finds sunglasses which allow him to see the 'real message' behind all the propaganda, publicity and various forms of social conditioning which surround him. The dark glasses allow him to see that he has been manipulated by social forces in every aspect of his life. Funnily enough, he can't persuade anyone else to wear them; the truth, as Zizek puts it, can be painful. One of the things my research is forcing me to do is to try and look at motherhood through these glasses.

One of my tasks this month was to make a dent in some of the literature that's already been written on the topic of motherhood. This task has really helped me to move those glasses a little closer to my eyes. But it's been surprisingly difficult. This is the first time that my research has felt really personal. It's often proved challenging to focus on what I'm reading, when I feel like the 'subject' being described is… well… *me*. I find myself daydreaming; trying to work out what *I* think makes a good mum, and where I got those ideas from. Can I envisage motherhood free from hegemonic forces? Not really. But I can try.
This week, not surprisingly, in the run-up to mother's day, motherhood seems to have seeped into every aspect of my life. Like everyone else in the country, I've been constantly reminded that I'm a mother, and that a very important day is about to arrive, where I will be rewarded for my commitment to the norm; for my selflessness, my tireless hard work, my endless sacrifices. I'm always there for my children, I'm told. I've nurtured them, supported them, picked them up from school, cleaned the house, cooked their tea, washed their clothes. I deserve a rest. And the truth is that I have. And I do. Not necessarily from my children (though that's always nice) – more from the mothering commandments that rain down upon me – and on every mother: I am the most important person in my childrens' lives. The kids' needs come first. My whole world revolves around them.

The bombardment of mothers-day related emails, facebook notifications, advertisements, conversations and school assemblies have actually helped me to see more clearly that I am being sold a very particular ideology of motherhood.

As a feminist, it's the first 'commandment' that bothers me the most. Because the truth is, though we're supposed to live in a post-feminist society (women can have it all! we're superhuman!), we are not anywhere near the equality that the suffragettes fought for so passionately all those years ago. And for me, that became painfully obvious only when I became a mother. Because only women can bear children. Only women can feed them in almost any situation. And it's those little biological details, I believe, that have led to the construction of a glass ceiling so high that perhaps we will never truly break through it. Woman = mother, and children, we are told, *need their mothers*.

I like to think that it's possible to put on those glasses and see that perhaps this isn't the case. Perhaps the commandments we soak up so hungrily (and I include myself here) have created a trap for women, which keeps us down, keeps us in our place. At the very least, I see no reason why men can't raise children just as well as women. In fact, I've had the pleasure to meet some men who *are* the main carer for their children. Times, it seems, are changing, albeit very slowly. But what about the rest of the community? There are plenty of cultures which see child-rearing as a community responsibility, or at least a responsibility for the extended family.

But do women want to put on the glasses? Because to see that ideology for what it is, and to reject it, may seem like a very painful reality indeed, when that ideology positions women in a very restrictive, but so very wonderful, place in society.

Aston University

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Appendix V. Supporting analyses: The classified advertisement frame

Table 6.1. A comparison of the features of classified advertisements as identified by Bruthiaux (1996) with nodes from 'Can we have a child exchange?'

Bruthiaux (1996)	Child exchange nodes
Omission of function words such as articles, pronouns, auxiliaries, 'be' copulas, modal verbs and some prepositions and conjunctions	Ellipsis
Long adjectival/ nominal/ verb chains; Heavy modification of noun phrases through listing	Heavily modified nouns
Descriptions and evaluations	Describing children (including the child nodes 'negative evaluations' and 'positive evaluations')
Idiomatic sequences and collocations	Stock phrases

Many of these conventions of the classified advertisement frame are introduced in the opening post:

██████

1. I can offer one (currently) sweaty and exuberant 5 year old. Reads most things.
2. Speaks some German. Quite helpful around the house.

3. Reason for sale: Excessive farting.

4. Any takers? 😁

██████ (henceforth 'Bertie') introduces a formulaic structure that can be described thus:

1. Statement of offer and a description in the form of an extended noun phrase: 'one (currently) sweaty and exuberant 5 year old' (line 1)
- Extended and elliptical description of the child's attributes 'Reads most things…' (lines 1-2)
- Reason for sale (line 3)
- Reiteration of offer: 'Any takers?' (line 4)

Many subsequent posts to 'Can we have a child exchange?' can also be said to key the classified advertisement frame, adopting a similar structure and style to the opening post by ██████ . For example:

██████

1. I have on offer one 13 yo DD. She's very clean and tidy and has been known to clean down the
2. kitchen, empty the dishwasher and make a batch of choc chip cookies if bored after school. Her
3. sausage rolls are also amazing.

4. At most other times she is to be found sitting with pen in hand, or typing away on her novel.

5. I'd be prepared to swap her for someone who actually falls asleep before midnight (or later) and
6. who is a bit easier to get up for school in the morning as a result.

7. Although it will be a temporary trade as I'll have her back on weekends, when she can be
8. trusted to stay in bed til at least 11 if allowed to.

███████ post mimics Bertie's formulaic structure very closely; it can be described thus:

- Statement of offer, including lexical items/ phrases related to the frame: 'on offer', and impersonal reference to the child: 'one 13 yo DD' (line 1);
- Extended description of the child's attributes and behaviour: 'She's very clean and tidy…' (lines 1-4);
- Reason for sale, including lexical items/ phrases related to the frame: 'prepared to swap' and formal lexical choices: 'as a result' (lines 5-6);
- Clarifying the terms of the offer, including lexical items/ phrases related to the frame: 'it will be a temporary trade' (lines 7-8).

Another recurring linguistic feature adopted in this thread is 'stock phrases'. Stock phrases are well known phrases that recognisably belong to the 'sales' field, and most are quite specific to the classified advertisement frame. The adoption of such stock phrases is particularly striking in some posts as they so recognisably belong to an 'alien' frame, unlike individual lexical items, which could conceivably be found in a much wider range of contexts. Because they are so striking, these stock phrases draw particular attention to the 'make-believe' keying of the personal advertisement frame that takes place here, emphasising the playful, performative nature of this thread.

███████

Warning: Not suitably *(sic)* for anyone with back or neck problems.

███████

Free to good home.

███████

Three years old. One careful owner.

The style of classified advertisements is formal, objective and impersonal. Participants key this frame through their use of formal lexical items and phrases such as 'frequently', 'particular fondness', 'complementary', 'requires' and 'approximately', as used in the following posts:

███████

promises **frequently** to 'always keep me in his heart…

███████

particular fondness for Hello Panda biscuits

███████

I'll take your 13 yo (with all instruments) to make a **complementary** pair with mine

███████

requires approximately twenty different games of Thomas the Tank engine per day

Participants' syntactical choices also index this formal, impersonal style. For example, posts often include conditional clauses, which are both a feature of formal writing more generally and in particular, the objective formality of the personal advertisement frame, in which the 'seller' sets out the specific qualities of the 'object' for sale, including caveats, or conditions in which the object for sale may be useful. In the following examples, conditional clauses are highlighted in bold:

███████

… Or for a child with no interest whatsoever in Minecraft, **if anyone has one of those**.

he doesn't enjoy sitting still but **if you like being outside and running around a lot then he's** the boy for you.

███████

He can juggle while ridding a unicyle, **should you require entertainment.**

███████

She's very clean and tidy and has been known to clean down the kitchen, empty the dishwasher and make a batch of choc chip cookies **if bored after school.**

███████

The final classified advertisement convention I will explore here is the use of ellipsis. The use of ellipsis in posts to this thread allows authors to focus attention on the object for sale and its attributes, and to convey a lot of information in a limited space. It is usually the actors involved in the 'exchange' process that are elided in this thread: namely, the 'seller' (the parent) and the child. For example, in Bertie's opening post, the child-subject is elided in Bertie's description of her child's attributes (elided subjects in square brackets):

███████

[S/he] Reads most things. [S/he] Speaks some German. [S/he is] Quite helpful around the house.

This is a common construction, variants of which are used throughout the thread in examples such as this:

███████

[She is a] Total bookworm, very sporty and is a Minecraftaholic.

In other examples, it is the 'seller' who is elided, as in the following examples (elided subjects in square brackets):

███████

[I] Also have a princess and horse obsessed nearly 3yo

███████

[I] Will swap for anything that stays still.

The elision of the subjects involved in the 'exchange' in these examples distances participants from the (make-believe) process taking place here and creates a formal, impersonal tone that is consistent with the conventions of the classified advertisement frame.

Appendix W. Supporting analyses: 'Indexing femininity'

The following excerpts continue this trend of competitive complaint identified in section 6.2.1, framed within the parameters of the classified advertisement frame, to humorous effect:

Needs a 20 mile run at least once a day so ideal for marathon training company… Three years old. One careful owner. Will swap for anything that stays still. (post 69, ██████████)

I have another Minecraft obsessive, he's 9, does not stop talking from the moment he wakes up… His brother is seven, likes singing "Everything is awesome" and is learning to play the drums… I'll swap them both for a guinea pig if anyone has a spare. (post 34, ████████)

In each of these excerpts, contributors emphasise their children's *negative* traits in a way that is *not* consistent with the 'classified advertisement' frame. Yet participants' linguistic choices work to emphasise these complaints, with ██████████ referring to her child's need for a '20 mile run' and his suitability for 'marathon training company', and ██████████ claiming that her child talks continually every moment he is awake. These hyperbolic claims create humour and also an underlying sense of competition that is *not* stereotypically associated with 'feminine' interactional styles.

Appendix X. Supporting analyses: 'Child-centricity'

In the opening post, Bertie puts forward both positive and negative evaluations of her child. Within the personal advertisement frame, the 'positives' can be read as 'reasons to buy/ exchange', and the 'negatives', in her own words, are the 'reason for sale':

███████

1. I can offer one (currently) sweaty and exuberant 5 year old. Reads most things.
2. Speaks some German. Quite helpful around the house.

3. Reason for sale: Excessive farting.

4. Any takers? 😂

One thing that becomes clear through these and later descriptions is that certain traits and behaviours in children are valued in this thread and others are not. For example, Bertie's opening post implies that she values intelligence ('reads most things'), special skills ('speaks some German') and helpfulness ('quite helpful around the house'). She does not value bad habits ('excessive farting'). Similar traits and behaviours are cited in other posts, such as this one, in which ██████ suggests that she values special skills ('also plays cornet') and affectionate behaviour ('exceptionally good at snuggles and kisses'), but does not value obsessive behaviour ('utterly obsessed with minecraft').

███████

1. One 10 year old for sale. Exceptionally good at snuggles and kisses. However, utterly
2. obsessed with minecraft and other age appropriate computer games not otherwise
3. specified. Eats most things, loves orange juice in any form, particular fondness for
4. Hello Panda biscuits available from any good Asian supermarket. Also plays cornet.
5. Will swap for girl of any age

Subsequent posts tend to reproduce these preferred and dispreferred traits and behaviours, with some variants, additions and exclusions. As the thread develops, contributors' descriptions and evaluations of their children come together to construct an image of the 'perfect child': one who is intelligent and/or ambitious, has a special skill, is clean, tidy and generally useful or helpful, has a pleasant disposition, is funny or entertaining, attractive and affectionate, among other 'preferred' traits.

Being physically affectionate (and often attractive) is a quality that is often attributed to babies in this thread, as the following examples show:

███████

He doesn't do much at the moment but he's lovely to snuggle and smells nice 😊

███████

In exchange I'm offering a seven-month-old who'll only sleep on you - perfect for anyone who misses baby snuggles!

███████

Baby very sweet and excellent at cuddles,

██████ and ██████ attribution of the adjectival phrases 'lovely to snuggle' and 'excellent at cuddles' shows that being 'affectionate' requires no action from the child: it is

something they can simply 'be'. Yet the positive response of other participants suggests that this 'passive affection' is highly desirable:

██████████

I want some baby snuggles!

██████████

Oh, ████████ I'll have the baby!!!!!!!!!!!!'

The bald, unmitigated nature of Bertie and ████████ requests emphasises their positive evaluation of, and desire for, babies and their affectionate dispositions. Both use exclamation marks to reinforce their positive feelings towards babies; in ████████ case, a series of 11 question marks in a row emphasises her positive evaluation. Both posts consist of a single line, which is unusual in the context of the thread as a whole, and again adds force to their statements. The emphatically positive evaluations of babies that underlie these posts draws on the theme of 'child-centricity' by positioning the authors as parents who have strong feelings towards children, particularly babies.

Being 'affectionate' is also a quality that is attributed to older children in this thread:

██████████

He gives great hugs and snuggles though, and promises frequently to 'always keep me in his heart, even when I die'.

██████████

One 10 year old for sale. Exceptionally good at snuggles and kisses.

What is consistent in participants' attribution of 'affectionate' qualities to children is the emphasis on the child's 'skilful' affection through the use of intensive adverbs and adjectives such as 'great', 'exceptionally', 'excellent' and 'lovely'. By emphasising their positive evaluations of their children's affectionate qualities, participants position themselves as loving parents. They draw attention for their desire to *be needed*; for their child to be physically present, closely held and cared for.

Another recurring positive attribute in this thread is intelligence, and associated qualities such as ambition, achievement and having a particular skill or talent. Intelligence is often attributed to children through positive evaluative adjectives such as 'clever' (████████, post 7 and ████████, post 43) or 'bright' (████████, post 87). Sometimes participants' positive evaluation of their children's special skills is made explicit through adjectives such as 'excellent' in 'excellent cook and percussionist' (████████, post 52), or 'amazing' in 'Her sausage rolls are also amazing' (████████, post 50). At other times, the description of the child is left unmodified, as in 'Also plays cornet (████████, post 33), 'recent graduate' (████████, post 52) and 'she is to be found sitting with pen in hand, or typing away on her novel' (████████, post 50). That these are *positive* attributes is left implicit, which shows that intelligence, achievement and possession of special skills are understood, in this context, to be valuable attributes in their own right.

By positively evaluating their children's intelligence, ambition and special skills, participants position themselves as proud parents who celebrate their children's achievements. They also position themselves as parents who value education, skills and good career prospects and as parents who provide their children with opportunities to succeed in these arenas. The naming of opportunities that involve significant investments of time and finances, such as going to university, learning an instrument and typing a novel, also index middle class status.

The final group of attributes I will exemplify here relates to children's personality and behaviour. Participants across the thread tend to use adjectives to positively evaluate their children's personality and behaviour. These adjectives serve to 'label' the child with a positive attribute,

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creating the impression that these are attributes they constantly display rather than one-off behaviours or actions. In this way, they positively evaluate the children themselves rather than their actions or behaviours. For example, children are labelled, amongst other things, as 'helpful', 'delightful', 'considerate', 'charming', 'lovely', 'funny', 'kindhearted' and 'well behaved'. These adjectives all carry explicitly positive evaluations. By valuing their children's pleasant disposition or lively personality, participants position themselves again as loving, adoring parents, who admire their children and evaluate the 'whole child' in positive terms. These descriptions also position participants as teachers of appropriate social and moral conduct, manners and behaviour.

Most contributors to 'Can we have a child exchange?', when describing their children as 'considerate' or 'well behaved', make no direct reference to what this might suggest about their own self-positioning. However, in the following post, ████████ (henceforth 'Goblin') makes explicit her own role in 'shaping' her children's personality and behaviour in a way that other participants do not:

████████

1. No.
2. I've spent years training mine to be useful human beings with an eye to them keeping
3. their Dear Old Mum in style and we're almost there. 😂
4. I come home to the washing up, laundry and hoovering done. If I want to add a job, I
5. post it on the fridge door and the 6' bearded elf does it whilst I'm at work. The other
6. Elf cooks and scrubs things until they are shiney.
7. Keep your squealing snot monsters that wake up at ungodly hours of the morning
8. please, I like the tranquility of a silent Saturday am.

Goblin's post is markedly different to other contributions to this thread. She is the only participant to overtly reject the personal advertisement frame, making this rejection explicit with her bald, direct opening refusal 'No'. This one-word sentence answers the question in the title of this thread: 'Can we have a child exchange?' in unmitigated, certain terms. Goblin continues to make linguistic choices that distinguish her post from others to the thread. For example, unlike other participants, Goblin begins her post with a sentence that focuses on *her own* actions in relation to her children (line 2). She emphasises her own *investment* in her children, using the monetary metaphor 'spent' and the plural 'years', which has an infinite numeric value, suggesting that her investment has been long and ongoing. The present participle 'training' also points to her continuing commitment and implies a feat of endurance. Goblin's use of the personal possessive pronoun 'mine' emphasises her relationship to, even ownership of, her children. By drawing attention to her responsibility for her children; her own role in bringing up, or in her words, 'training' her children, Goblin suggests that her children's attributes reflect directly on her as a parent.

Appendix Y. Supporting analyses: Analysing a representative sequence from 'Can we have a child exchange?'

████████

1. I have a truly delightful 13 year old boy available. He's clever, funny, helpful,affectionate and
2. considerate. However. He is currently teaching himself to play the harmonica. And he already
3. plays the didgeridoo and the ukelele. Sometimes at the same time.

In some posts, participants use 'double-speak' in a way that is *not* consistent with the personal advertisement frame, presenting hearably *positive* attributes in *negative* terms. In post 7, for example, ████████ evaluates her child's special skills, which are often marked as 'valued' traits in other posts, in negative terms, by associating them with the negative attributes of obsessive behaviour, noisiness and disruption. The single word sentence 'However' in this post punctuates a shift from positive to negative descriptions and marks a 'dramatic pause' of the kind used in speech to heighten the impact of what has just been, or is about to be said.

████████ negative framing of what could be read as a 'valued' trait points to a reluctance to be unequivocally negative about her child. Not only does ████████ (the author's) positivity towards and love for her child come across in explicitly positive evaluations like 'truly delightful' (line 1), it also comes through her 'negative' evaluations. In this post, ████████ negotiates the conventions of the personal advertisement frame, which requires that she give a 'reason for sale' together with the child-centricity theme which positions parents as loving and relentlessly positive about their children in order to produce these double-edged evaluations that maintain her alignment with both.

████████ (The author's) post positions her within the child-centricity theme not only because she focuses on her child's positive attributes. This post also points to her willingness to 'put up' with the dispreferred consequences of her child's interests; namely, relentless noise and disruption. Though she 'complains' (in an implicit way) about the disruption this causes, there is no indication that ████████ tries, or would try, to prevent it. She therefore communicates a willingness to put her son's desire to practice his musical instruments before her own desire (presumably) for peace and quiet. ████████ can therefore be said to use complaints about her child to position herself within the 'child-centricity' theme; as a parent who is committed to her child, who puts their needs before her own.

By maintaining the possibility of a positive reading of her children's activities and behaviour, ████████ not only maintains a positive evaluation of her child, but also, by association, of herself as a parent. As shown in section 5.2.1, participants' unwillingness to be unequivocally negative about their children may also reflect their sense that their own positioning as 'good parents' is intricately tied to the behaviour and attributes their children exhibit. The interrelationship between parents and children within the 'child-centricity' theme, then, is complex; in positively evaluating their children, participants position themselves within the 'child-centricity' theme because they place children at the centre of their lives and support all they do. But the child's behaviour, in turn, reflects back on the parent; by positively evaluating the child, they also position themselves as 'good parents'. In this cycle, participants cannot escape the theme of child-centricity because the way they evaluate their children in turn positions *them* as parents: they will always be evaluated in relation to their children.