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Motherhood Online: Issues and Opportunities for Discourse Analysis

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Abstract

This article collection is a response to the rapid acceleration of research interest in 'motherhood online', defined here as a field concerned with the production and reception of digital media that is produced by mothers and/or about motherhood, and is related to issues of maternal identities, communities or practices. It contributes to this field of study by presenting a selection of six articles that examine these concerns from a discourse analytical perspective. These articles explore a range of socio-maternal practices such as experiential knowledge-sharing (Lyons) and infant feeding (Coffey-Glover), and experiences such as maternal regret (Matley) and postnatal depression (Kinloch & Jaworska). They examine contemporary concepts of motherhood and mothering practice as they intersect with domains such as religion (Ringrow), healthcare (Coffey-Glover; Kinloch & Jaworska) and gendered (in)equalities (Lazar & Ke). Further, the articles consider the opportunities and challenges that arise when individuals navigate these issues in a range of online contexts, from now well-established sites such as blogs (Coffey-Glover; Ringrow) and online forums (Kinloch & Jaworska; Matley), to newer forms of digital media including messaging apps (Lyons) and video-sharing platforms (Lazar & Ke). In this introduction, we summarise some key themes of motherhood online research to date, outline the rationale for a discourse analytical perspective in this field, and locate this article collection within a broader interdisciplinary context.

Motherhood Online: The emergence of an interdisciplinary agenda

The last decade has witnessed a rapid acceleration of research interest around the production and reception of online media, communication and interaction produced by mothers, and/or concerning the theme of motherhood. This research activity has given rise to a unique field of interdisciplinary study, which we call 'motherhood online'. This body of work brings together two critical social research agendas concerning, on the one hand, the evolution of maternal identities, communities and practices in post-industrial societies; and on the other, the role of digital and social media in shaping such contemporary identities, communities and social practices. Motherhood itself is a long-standing subject of cultural and scholarly intrigue, with experiences, representations and ideals of motherhood attracting ongoing social, historical and artistic interest. Seminal feminist work has suggested that the enduring idealisation and scrutiny of motherhood is bound up with dominant macro-discourses of gender, heteronormativity and biological essentialism, with cultural meanings of motherhood being imbricated in essentialist, heteronormative ideals of femininity and womanhood (Bem, 1993; Hays 1996; Rich, 1986). More recently,

motherhood has been identified as a site of intense discursive tension, as these dominant, interrelated structures are rigorously examined and challenged, giving rise to conflict between, for example, feminism and neoliberalism (Jensen, 2013; Steiner & Bronstein, 2017); biological essentialism and sexual (non-) normativity (Goldberg 2012; Mamo, 2007), and autonomy versus child-centricity (Mackenzie 2019; Wall 2013).

Against this backdrop of continued fascination, debate and contestation, 'motherhood online' has developed as a distinct interdisciplinary field with a gendered focus. Although there is growing research interest in related spheres, including explorations of digital media in relation to fatherhood (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2015; Thomas et al., 2018) and transnational families (Madianou & Miller, 2012; Wilding et al. 2020), in this collection we focus squarely on motherhood online. This is a field that continues to yield important scholarly and sociocultural insights, through research that highlights the complex interaction and interrelation between gendered social practices, identities and communities on the one hand, and new technologies, affordances and social media on the other. For example, many studies of motherhood online have shown how sites of discursive conflict can be negotiated, explored and evaluated through digital platforms and associated practices such as blogs (Orton-Johnson, 2017; Petersen, 2015), discussion forums (Mackenzie 2019; Strekalova 2016) and social media (Locatelli 2017; Tiidenberg & Baym 2017). In turn, the design and use of digital technologies themselves may be impacted by the needs and cultural imperatives of mothers and motherhood, just as they are impacted by other social groups and imperatives (see Burgess & Baym, 2020 on the user-led development of Twitter; Zhao et al., 2014 on the interaction between the design and use of software applications).

A number of key insights have emerged over a decade of research in the interdisciplinary field of motherhood online, and these findings often have practical applications in a range of domains. The finding that the internet is an important site of social support for new and expectant mothers, for example, has particular relevance for providers of health and social care (Archer & Kao, 2018; Asiodu et al., 2015; Haslam et al., 2017; Lupton, 2016; Madge & O'Connor, 2006). Research showing how mothers use digital technologies to collate, evaluate and negotiate experiential and professional parent-related knowledge also has important implications for health professionals (Hine, 2014; Holland, 2019; Papen, 2013; Song et al., 2012; Strekalova, 2016). Studies that examine women's use of digital technologies and sites to mediate debate and discussion around the construction and representation of motherhood have also shed light on contemporary concepts of motherhood itself, including maternal identities, practices and communities (Lopez, 2009; Moore & Abetz, 2019; Orton-Johnson, 2017; Pedersen, 2016; Tiidenberg & Baym, 2017). Often, these spheres overlap in studies of motherhood online. For example, mothers may draw on digital resources to share and evaluate parent-related knowledge as *part of* their self-positioning as a 'good parent' (see Hine, 2014).

Understanding motherhood online has been, from the very start, a multi- and interdisciplinary endeavour. The constantly shifting nature of digital media and technology,

combined with the way issues of mothering and motherhood affect so many spheres of social life, calls for innovative dialogue between different theoretical traditions and methodological approaches. Discourse analytical research, which attends to the interpretation of micro-level practices in relation to macro-social structures, is particularly well suited to explorations of the interaction between motherhood as social construct, mothering as social practice, and online discourse as social action. Indeed, a number of discourse analysts have already begun to address these interrelated themes. The following section will locate this article collection within the growing tradition of discourse analytical 'motherhood online' research.

Discourse Research and Motherhood Online

In bringing together this article collection, we suggest that discourse analytical research is able to explore both established and emerging concerns for motherhood online scholarship from unique perspectives. One such concern is the production of parent-related knowledge and expertise, as exemplified in Hanell and Salö's (2017) exploration of the Swedish online parenting site *Familjeliv* ('family life'). It has been well established that online sites and forums can be extremely valuable to mothers, especially new and expectant mothers, as they seek information, alongside social support, from others in similar situations (see Johnson, 2015; Pedersen, 2014; Strekalova, 2016). Hanell and Salö's (2017) work offers more in-depth analysis and theorisation of such knowledge-construction practices, using mediated discourse analysis (Norris & Jones 2005; Scollon & Scollon 2004) to explore how parent-related social practices and actions are constituted in the *Familjeliv* discussion forum. More specifically, they examine some of the processes by which sharing experience online can actually *produce* knowledge. They show, for example, how one site user's post about the usefulness of medical and cosmetic supplies such as wipes and creams may be taken up by another user as a 'knowledge resource', which in turn may affect their own childcare practice. In this way, users of *Familjeliv* may engage with discussion forum threads 'as a way of enabling future actions' (Hanell and Salö, 2017: 159).

The knowledge resources elaborated by Hanell and Salö (2017) relate almost exclusively to the construction of personal experience as knowledge, rather than more institutionally legitimised forms of knowledge such as those produced by medical professionals. Several studies of motherhood online, however, have explored this interplay between personal experience and institutional expertise in more depth. Holland (2019) and Zaslow's (2012) respective analyses of mothers' online journals and health communities, for example, suggest that knowledge about parenting and motherhood is often constructed in digital spaces through the careful balance and evaluation of personal experience *alongside* the institutionally validated expertise of professionals and experts. Lyons' article for the current collection elaborates such complex negotiations of parental expertise in further detail. Analysing instant messages within a WhatsApp chat group for new mums, Lyons considers how participants use a range of discursive moves to negotiate the 'expertise paradox' (whereby mothers are positioned as both in need of expert help, and also entirely

responsible for their children). Drawing on positioning theory (Davies & Harré, 1990; Harré & Van Langenhove, 1998), Lyons shows how the position of 'expert' shifts between different group members and external, 'expert' sources, according to topic, experience and context. She is thus able to move beyond the familiar finding that 'official' forms of expertise are interwoven with mothers' own experiential knowledge, to demonstrate the moment-by-moment shifts and complexities of this delicate balance. Lyons suggests that the private messaging app WhatsApp has a significant impact on the way these mothers construct and negotiate knowledge and expertise, identifying this as a site where new mums can create a pool of parent-related knowledge that combines and merges both expert and experiential domains.

The discourse analytical approaches employed by Hanell and Salö (2017) and Lyons (this collection) provide detailed elaboration of the strategies by which a careful balance between medical and experiential parent-related knowledge can be managed in multi-party digital interactions. Further, Jaworska's (2018) analysis of online stories about postnatal depression (PND) in the UK parenting discussion forum Mumsnet Talk illustrates the value of narrative analysis in these kinds of exploration. Her analysis shows, for instance, that the narrative form of the *exemplum* (a canonical form in which the storyteller shares a moral judgement) enables Mumsnet users to speak from the powerful position of 'knower', lending authenticity and credibility to institutional knowledge by filtering it through personal experience. Revisiting this Mumsnet data in their article for this collection, Kinloch and Jaworska explore Mumsnet users' disclosures and explorations of PND using a different set of methodological tools derived from corpus-assisted discourse studies. Here, the authors consider how the dominant biomedical model that separates *mind* and *body* is taken up and negotiated in Mumsnet users' discussions. Through a collocation and concordance analysis that focuses on the frequently co-occurring word pairs 'my body', 'your body' and 'body and', they show that contributors rework the mind/body dualism by locating mental illness and distress *within* the physical body. For example, they identify expressions that emphasise individuals' lack of control over their bodies, and make reference to physical manifestations of mental illness such as sleeplessness. Kinloch and Jaworska (this collection) suggest that such framings of mental illness as whole-body experience can contribute to the transformation of mental health discourses, and discourses of PND specifically, by validating and destigmatising the condition. On the other hand, they suggest that some explanatory models focusing on bodily experience, especially sleeplessness, may trivialise and minimise disclosures of PND, framing users' experiences as just a 'normal' part of motherhood. Thus, whilst Mumsnet users' ability to openly explore their experiences of PND within this anonymous forum may have positive effects, high levels of mental and physical discomfort are also being normalised in these kinds of lay discourses, feeding into broader discourses of maternal self-sacrifice and endurance.

All of the articles in this special collection work, in different ways, to examine some of the specific processes and practices at work in mothers' complex online negotiations of intersecting, complementary or conflicting social forces. Some articles are particularly well

suiting to elaborating the spaces 'in-between' conflicting or overlapping spheres, because their focus lies at the very intersection of different domains within a single digital context. Ringrow's article in this collection, for example, reveals important insights about the relevance of religion for many mothers' understanding of their parental roles, through her application of Conceptual Metaphor Theory to the analysis of U.S. 'mommy blogs'¹ by Christian authors. Her article shows how conventional metaphors are reworked in frequent constructions such as 'motherhood is a journey' and 'motherhood is a job'. These metaphors, she suggests, have particular spiritual meanings for these religious mommy bloggers, whose beliefs about the divine calling of motherhood, and motherhood as the primary goal in a woman's life, position successful child-raising as the end-goal in a difficult yet immensely rewarding experience. The intersections between religion and motherhood in digital contexts remain under-explored in motherhood online research, yet Ringrow is able to show here that digital technologies can facilitate the merging of secular, religious and maternal domains. Her focus on these U.S. bloggers' use of metaphor is a particularly effective way of bringing connections between gender, parenthood and faith to light.

Looking at a very different context, Lazar and Ke (this collection) also explore a digital site whereby different domains converge. These authors show how the remediation of a Chinese television program on video-sharing websites facilitates the overlapping of multiple perspectives in the form of 'netizen comments' that are overlaid, concurrently, on the original video. This data is unique in the collection as a whole, because it takes the more traditional media format of a television show, which has a relatively distinct boundary between content producer and audience, and then observes how this boundary is complicated by the remediation process. This process means that viewers can become commentators on the programme, thus bringing a wide range of perspectives into play. Through a feminist critical discourse analysis that focuses on constructions of the maternal role in relation to complementary and/or conflicting identities such as the 'wage earner' and the 'distant breadwinner', Lazar and Ke find that the convergence of different perspectives in such participatory, multi-authored contexts can reveal 'pressure points' in prevailing ideologies. Specifically, they suggest that remediation processes provide fruitful ground for the transformation of *nei-wa* (inside/outside) ideology, which keeps women's and men's social roles and obligations distinct and separate. This transformation is made possible, Lazar and Ke suggest, by the construction of a space in which the oppositional relation between roles such as 'father-as-breadwinner' and 'stay-at-home-mother' can be broken down and contested. On the other hand, the convergence of multiple, overlapping and sometimes conflicting expectations in this space point to the persistence of a 'double bind' for Chinese mothers, leaving them unable to fully embrace

¹ 'Mommy blog' is a contested term in both culture and scholarship. Steiner & Bronstein (2017) suggest this is a 'juvenile label' that 'masks the seriousness' of blogs, feeding into gendered stereotypes and inequalities. Chen's (2011) analysis of posts that debate the use of 'mommy blogger' explores the problematic nature of the term. It nevertheless continues to be the term in widest circulation, including by bloggers themselves.

either stay-at-home mother *or* wage-earning identities without a degree of guilt and conflict.

The discourse analytical approach taken by Lazar and Ke, like many other articles in this collection, results in an unravelling of the multiple, complex and competing ways in which structural and normative constraints around gender and family roles can be discursively entangled at a local level with individual agency and experience. Other discourse analyses of motherhood online have offered similarly illuminating investigations of such discursive tensions. Mackenzie's (2017, 2018, 2019) exploration of Mumsnet Talk, for example, reveals that whilst Mumsnet can be a fruitful site for disrupting and challenging norms and ideals around femininity and 'good' motherhood (see also Pedersen, 2016; Pedersen & Smithson, 2013), popular online parenting sites such as this are by no means univocally transgressive or emancipatory in their potential. Matley (this collection) elaborates this line of investigation, exploring the complex ways in which regulatory norms around 'good motherhood' are taken up, contested and resisted by contributors to Mumsnet threads about maternal regret. Combining Davies and Harré's (1990) theory of positioning with Du Bois' (2007) work on stance, Matley shows that Mumsnet users are able to adopt agentic and transgressive positions in the face of pressures to be absolutely committed to, and relentlessly enthusiastic about, mothering and motherhood. For example, he shows how women are able to contest binary discourses of good/bad motherhood and 'lift the taboo of regret' by re-imagining what has been lost, or what could have been, through counterfactual statements such as 'I miss' or 'I wish'. Matley also draws attention to the importance of collective sharing in this forum. For example, he shows how maternal regret can be legitimised and validated through co-constructed experiences of regret, including echoing and ritual appreciation of one another's posts. However, Matley also shows that contributors sometimes reject or marginalise aspects of maternal regret, for example by repositioning others' feelings as something other than regret. Matley suggests that such negotiations and evaluations of maternal regret through collaborative exploration are an important part of wider transitions and transformations in dominant sociocultural concepts of motherhood and maternal feeling.

Exploring another site of socio-maternal conflict, Coffey-Glover's article for this collection explores the way a selection of U.S. bloggers negotiate discourses of infant feeding in posts about their experiences of 'exclusive pumping'. This form of feeding, used by some parents who are unable to nurse their babies at the breast, involves expressing breastmilk and feeding it to an infant through a bottle. Coffey-Glover's analysis, which focuses on the bloggers' evaluative stance-taking (drawing from Bednarek, 2006 & Myers, 2010), shows that the blog posts are a key site for negotiating discourses of 'good' motherhood and infant feeding. Most notably, she points to the persistence of a dominant 'breast is best' discourse that undermines and excludes forms of infant feeding that do not involve nursing at the breast. In line with Kinloch and Jaworska's findings, Coffey-Glover also highlights persistent notions of the 'failing' maternal body in this online discourse. Both articles reveal that high levels of maternal endurance and self-sacrifice, in line with a

discourse of 'intensive motherhood' (Hays, 1996), are promoted and normalised in these digital contexts. In turn, both have important implications for practitioners with a stake in the health and social care of new mothers, pointing to some of the specific linguistic formulations that engender potentially damaging ideals of motherhood and mothering practice.

Motherhood Online: Progressing beyond the state-of-art

The studies included in this collection reflect the state-of-art in motherhood online research. Collectively, they engage with key intersecting issues and concerns for the field, such as the negotiation of parent-related knowledge, ideals of 'good motherhood', infant feeding practices and maternal health. They have also shown how a range of socio-digital technologies can promote opportunities for exploring intersections between gender, parenthood and other domains such as marriage, religion and mental health. They illustrate the value of discourse analytical approaches for unpacking the complex socio-technological structures and processes at work in discussions about and around motherhood in digital contexts. By embracing a range of discourse analytical approaches, these studies have been able to address not only the 'what' questions of motherhood online, elaborating the nature of key discourses, social norms and practices, but also the 'how' questions, considering how those discourses, norms and practices can be negotiated, moment-by-moment, in digital contexts. As we reflect on the contents of this collection and look to the future of this rapidly developing field, we acknowledge the relative homogeneity of the identities, communities and experiences that are explored here. As discourse analysts continue to engage with issues around parenting and the family through the exploration of online and digital media, we call for increased diversity, in terms of the race, class, culture, nationality, gender, and family structures of the subjects and related data that we examine. By doing so, discourse analytical work can contribute to the broadening of restrictive concepts around not just motherhood, but also parenthood, care and the family more broadly.

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