

<https://helda.helsinki.fi>

Childish, Self-Centered, and Cruel : Classed D
Maternal Complaint, and Mediated Morality in an Anonymous
Online Discussion Board

Mustosmäki, Armi

Routledge
2022

Mustosmäki , A & Sihto , T 2022 , Childish, Self-Centered, and Cruel
Maternal Complaint, and Mediated Morality in an Anonymous Online Discussion Board . in M
Ryynänen , H Kosonen & S Ylönen (eds) , Cultural Approaches to Disgust and the Visceral .
1st Edition edn , Routledge , New York , pp. 59-73 . <
<https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/oa-edit/10.4324/9781003205364-8/childish-self-centered-cruel-armi-mustosma>
>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/355836>

cc_by_nc_nd
publishedVersion

Downloaded from Helda, University of Helsinki institutional repository.

This is an electronic reprint of the original article.

This reprint may differ from the original in pagination and typographic detail.

Please cite the original version.

5 “Childish, Self-Centered, and Cruel”

Classed Disgust, Maternal Complaint, and Mediated Morality in an Anonymous Online Discussion Board

Armi Mustosmäki and Tiina Sihto

FUCK THIS SHIT that this day-to-day real life is with a newborn. It's so true, your home becomes a prison. . . . Being awake is a continuous struggle while you try to figure out why it is whining or screaming this time and nothing really makes it easier . . . Not a lot of eye contact yet so it's mentally very tiring to hang out with a living doll. . . . You have milk running out of your tits continuously and all your clothes need to be planned so that you can breastfeed.

Everything is about the baby. When you finally make it out of the house for two hours, you pour wine down your throat with both hands and everyone that comes over to talk asks how things are going, even discussions with strangers are all about the baby shit!! Then you call a taxi so you can get back to the shushing. Yay.

Your belly bulges in your own clothes, you look like you're still pregnant, and your hair and face are in need of some care and soon. Your face is decorated by a couple big liver spots due to hormones and you look like you've aged 10 years in two months. . . .

I've always said I don't like babies, they are useless whining creatures that have slime of all colors oozing out of all holes. I was right about that. . . . The best part of course is that you can't under any circumstances say that you hate this stuff.

– Two hours after posting this –

Now that the media seems to have again torn this post into their news, I'll add here that the most beloved thing in the world is my little Penny girl ♥

Don't send me hate mail, I'm not going to read it or react to it. I don't give a fuck about any sanctimonious bullshit about this.

These are extracts from a 2017 blog post by Finnish celebrity Sini Ariell. Ariell lives in Australia and is known for her work as a tattooist and in the pinup modeling industry as well as her reality TV appearances (e.g. *Tattoo Studio HelsINK* and *Australia's Cheapest Weddings*). In the post, Ariell described her experiences as the mother of a newborn. It quickly went viral, sparking heated discussions in various Finnish digital media forums. In this chapter we engage with public responses to Ariell's post on the anonymous online discussion board *Vauva.fi*. Focusing on motherhood and family life (*vauva* is Finnish for “baby”), *Vauva.fi* resembles forums in other countries, such as Mumsnet in the UK (e.g. Jensen 2013). Taking an affective-discursive approach, we are interested in the controversy Ariell's post spawned and the moral and value positions it generated through the reactions of disgust and its circulation in the discussion.

Public “maternal complaint” (cf. “female complaint,” Berlant 2008) has become increasingly visible in the media in recent years. In TV (*Catastrophe, Motherland*) and cinema (*Bad Mothers*), mothers are behaving “badly,” rebelling against the norms of “perfect” motherhood (Littler 2019). These cultural representations might suggest that it has become more acceptable to express and discuss the “negative” emotions of motherhood – to say that motherhood is not always wonderful or fulfilling. However, heterosexual nuclear family life is still very much a “happy object” (Ahmed 2010) loaded with expectations of happiness, stability and reciprocity. Although some cultural representations portray mothers as exhausted and at times even unhappy, they remain relentlessly invested in good mothering and the ideal of happy family life (Littler 2019).

At the same time, Finland’s birth rate has reached an all-time low (OSF 2019), leading to a fervent public debate about the causes and potential solutions. One constant topic in this debate is maternal complaint and whether the “oversharing” of negative experiences and feelings has damaged the “brand” of family life (e.g. HS 2017). Consequently, it has been argued in the media that family life should be “rebranded” in order to boost the country’s fertility rate, and that new parents – particularly mothers – should therefore emphasize the positive aspects of family life. Thus, Ariell’s blog post and the discussion surrounding it emerged at a cultural conjuncture where moral anxiety circulated regarding the “damaged brand” of family life, pronatalist discourses, and affects related to the family as a “happy object.”

To analyze the mediation, mobilization, and circulation of disgust in online discussions, we draw on previous sociological scholarship on disgust (e.g. Lawler 2005; Moore 2016) and feminist scholarship on disgust as a classed affect (Ahmed 2004; Skeggs and Wood 2012; Tyler 2008). This scholarship has shown how disgust is attached to and directed at the “lower classes,” and how social divisions are (re)produced through the policing of morality in the realm of culture (Skeggs and Wood 2012; Tyler 2008). By tracing the reactions, objects, and circulations of disgust, our analysis contributes to discussions about how disgust is mobilized to maintain or challenge the existing moral and social order regarding reproduction and motherhood.

Social Class, Motherhood, and Moral Disgust

Finland is often characterized as a Nordic welfare state that strives for egalitarianism and seeks to even out the inequalities embedded in social hierarchies. Thanks to its welfare state ethos, Finland has a history of the “illusion of classlessness”: it has often been thought that the country’s free education and extensive social services and benefits make equal opportunities available to all. Consequently, social class has been a sensitive issue insofar as it contradicts the ideals promoted by the welfare state. For decades, Finns were commonly described as being – or at least becoming – “one big middle class,” and it was claimed that class differences no longer existed. However, since the 2008 economic crisis, discussion and research about social class has revived in Finland (for reviews, see e.g. Erola 2010; Kolehmainen 2017) – “one big middle class” no longer seems to be the reality, if indeed it ever was.

Social class is a much-debated concept with different definitions. We understand social class as a discursive, historically specific construct that centrally influences access to economic and cultural resources (Skeggs 2004, 2005). Thus, class cannot be understood in terms of economic capital or labor market positions alone: inequalities

are (re)produced through processes of distinction whereby middle-class identities are marked as normal and desirable, while working classness is marked as abnormal and undesirable (e.g. Lawler 2004, 2005). The middle-class gains value by attaching negative value to the working class; for example, middle-class subjects aim to make themselves tasteful by judging classed others as tasteless (Skeggs 2004, 2005). Consequently, class is also an emotionally mediated (Tyler 2008), moralized position (Skeggs 2004) that usually involves making somebody “the other” – “immoral, repellent, abject, worthless, disgusting or even disposable” (Skeggs 2005, 977).

Previous studies (e.g. Jensen 2013; Skeggs and Wood 2012) have pointed out that norms and hierarchies related to class are often articulated through affective judgments. This connection between affect and moral judgment is exemplified in perceptions of the desirable and the damaging. Class-based affective judgments are particularly present in discussions surrounding contemporary motherhood. Parenthood, especially motherhood, is a site where classed ideals and norms are (re)produced and maintained. Contemporary parenting culture and ideals regarding motherhood, which highlight practices of “intensive mothering” (Hays 1996), can be seen as thoroughly middle-class (e.g. Perrier 2013). These practices are characteristically time-consuming, child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive – and thus out of reach for those who do not have sufficient temporal and financial resources.

On the other side of the coin, there is the public scrutiny and mockery of working-class mothers who are labeled “white trash” and associated with disgust and waste. Writing about the UK context, Tyler (2008) argues that the white trash “chav mum” is an affective figure produced through reactions of disgust, embodying contemporary – and historically familiar – anxieties about working-class women and “excessive” and “irresponsible” reproduction and fertility. Arguably, however, the judgment of the “chav mum” not only targets “lower-class” mothers but also establishes and tightens the norms around middle-class motherhood, with the expectation that middle-class women will want to distinguish themselves as strongly as possible from “chav mums” in order to be seen as good, respectable mothers (Tyler 2008). While “ideal” motherhood is also classed in Finland (e.g. Berg 2008; Hiitola 2015), Finnish societal realities differ from those of Anglo-Saxon countries, and those differences should be taken into account when one is applying Anglo-Saxon research to Finnish contexts. However, previous research has shown that cultural markers of social class in Finland bear striking similarities with those found in Anglo-Saxon countries – e.g. individual attributes which are seen to represent forms of excess, dirt, and lack of (self-)control are seen as signs of “lower-class” (Kolehmainen 2017).

Disgust can take two different forms: physical and moral. Physical disgust involves sensory modalities, and it occurs reflexively when one comes into proximity with objects that elicit bodily revulsion (e.g. rotten food, excrement, blood). Although it bears some resemblance to physical disgust, moral disgust is a more complex, ambivalent, and multifaceted emotional constellation, as it can be accompanied by a range of other emotions, such as sadness or anger (Abitan and Krauth-Gruber 2015). Indeed, moral disgust can be so closely tied to anger that it is often difficult to separate the two (Russell and Giner-Sorolla 2013). However, what distinguishes disgust from anger is that disgust involves evaluations of “the other” (an individual or group) as inferior, and it contains moral judgments regarding others’ failures or moral transgressions (Pantti 2016).

In this chapter, we focus on disgust as a social sentiment that plays “a motivating and confirming role in moral judgements” (Miller 1997, 2). We are also interested in the relationship between moral disgust and social contamination. Disgust is often seen as concerned with the fear of becoming contaminated, infected, or polluted by proximity to, contact with, or ingestion of the disgusting object (Miller 1997). As Moore (2016) notes, when we recognize our own disgust and proximity to the disgusting object, we also recognize the risk of being contaminated and thus becoming disgusting ourselves. Disgust is about being “too close” to the object of disgust and thus to the risk of contamination, for which reason the object of disgust has to be “pushed away” (Lewis 2012). However, as disgust is deeply ambivalent, it can also involve desire for the object of disgust (Ahmed 2004).

Moral disgust is not born or maintained in a vacuum. It is tied to social agreements and power (Tyler 2013), and to middle-class fears of social contagion (Wood 2018). Moral disgust expects some degree of social concurrence (Miller 1997; Tyler 2013), as it demands that others share a similar affective relation to the object of disgust (Lewis 2012) and “seeks to include or draw others into its exclusion of its object” (Ngai 2005, 336). As Tyler (2013, 23) notes, “there is no disgust without an existing disgust consensus.” Consequently, “ugly feelings” such as disgust also have their own social and political functions (e.g. Miller 1997; Ngai 2005; Tyler 2013), and disgust reactions are often revealing of wider social power relations. Those who have access to economic, social, and cultural resources often have the power to determine what is seen as morally disgusting (Lawler 2005). Therefore, disgust is often about establishing and maintaining difference and boundaries between the self and “contaminating” other(s), with those who fall on the “wrong” side of the boundaries being negatively defined and excluded (Ngai 2005; see also Miller 1997).

Data and Methods

Ariell’s post was published in Finnish on her personal blog as well as on her Facebook page on 11 December 2017. She mainly writes in Finnish, but the posts are translated into English. The translation appeared online the following day. The extracts at the start of this chapter are from the English version of the post. The data analyzed for this chapter came from a discussion thread on the anonymous online forum *Vauva.fi*. This is one of Finland’s most popular websites, reaching around 500,000 visitors every week (a relatively high number, as the population of Finland is only 5.5 million). Comments on the site are moderated to ensure legality, good manners (e.g. no hate speech), and functionality (e.g. no trolling) (*Vauva.fi* 2021).

For our analysis, we chose the discussion thread that contained the most comments about Ariell’s post. The thread was user-generated, with 499 comments written between 11 and 22 December 2017. This was one of the site’s most popular threads, and it appeared on the main page. We interpreted this popularity and the intensity of the reactions as a sign of the intensity and “stickiness” (Ahmed 2004) of the affects that circulated around Ariell’s post. However, like the “scandal” itself, the thread was intense but relatively short-lived: most of the comments (343 in total) were posted within 24 hours of the thread’s appearance online.

Vauva.fi’s terms and conditions state that all content published on its site is the sole property of *Vauva.fi*, and the reproduction of any parts without approval is prohibited. We therefore obtained consent from *Vauva.fi* to use the discussion forum

data for our research purposes. The terms and conditions also stipulate that *Vauva.fi*'s discussion forums are public spaces, and users are responsible for the content of their own posts. In the thread, some comments were pseudonymous, but almost all were anonymous. This made it possible for users to discuss sensitive topics without links to their own comment histories. To further protect participants' anonymity, we have ensured that none of data extracts used in this chapter include identifiers such as comment numbers. By translating the extracts from Finnish into English, we have also made it more difficult to track down individual comments.

Because of their anonymity, securing the commenters' informed consent would have been impossible. Some argue that informed consent should always be obtained, while others suggest that participants who post on public forums have already given consent automatically (e.g. Roberts 2015). This study follows the approach taken by previous research where informed consent was not sought from participants in online forums that were considered to be public spaces (Jaworska 2018). It is also important for researchers to access spontaneously generated data so as to be able to study emerging societal phenomena as they appear, without the researchers' interference. Internet methods are particularly fruitful for studying sensitive topics and groups that are difficult to reach (e.g. Hammond 2018). Online discussion forums are important sites of meaning-making, as they collectively produce affective atmospheres and sensibilities that reflect our current cultural conjuncture. Berlant (2008, viii) suggests that social media platforms are increasingly important sites “of consolation, confirmation, discipline, and discussion about how to live as an x.”

We study these sensibilities by analyzing affective-discursive practices in the discussion thread, drawing on Wetherell's (2012) perception of the interwovenness of discourse, emotions, and affect (see also Ahmed 2004). In this framework, affective practices are seen as social processes that are shaped not only by social orders but also by a site's digital technologies and architectures, which involve bodies, feeling states, and discourses that aim to make sense of the world. Anonymous discussion forums have their own specific affective circuits, logics of functioning, and public allure. The dynamics and interactions in threads often appear nonlinear, hectic, chaotic, and filled with moments of emotional intensity. Anonymity can invite highly polarized and emotional styles of discussion and commentary. Thus threads are often “soaked with affect and antagonism,” and exchanges can be “petty, spiteful and bullying” (Jensen 2013, 128). In such discussions, intense affects – disavowal, irritation, disgust – and ideas about immorality, dirt, and contagion are often directed toward and attached to classed others (Jensen 2013; Kolehmainen 2017). Practices of trolling and flaming are also widely recognized.

Before we started our analysis regarding disgust's role in the discussions dealing with Ariell's blog post, we were already familiar with the data, which we had analyzed for a research paper on the negotiation of boundaries of acceptable maternal emotions (Mustosmäki and Sihto 2021). While conducting our analysis for that paper, we noticed that particular affective intensities (Paasonen 2015) circulated around expressions of disgust in the thread: comments containing disgust seemed to arouse strong reactions, with large numbers of responses from other commenters as well as upvotes and downvotes. Comments that contained disgust also seemed to steer the discussion into new and sometimes unexpected directions.

In this chapter, we are particularly interested in tracing reactions of disgust and emotions that are closely aligned with disgust, such as anger, contempt, and hatred.

In line with Ahmed (2004), we ask: what are the objects of disgust? What triggers disgust, and where is it directed? What does disgust do? While conducting the data analysis, we did not restrict our focus to clear and direct reactions of disgust but also included related emotional reactions, such as contempt, anger, and hate. Although these emotions all have different triggers, psychologists (Izard 1977) and cultural theorists (Ahmed 2004) perceive them as strongly moral emotions that maintain moral and social boundaries. These boundaries are blurry in social media discussions: moral disgust appears alongside related emotions (e.g. Pantti 2016), and they often blend with and reinforce one another. Moral disgust, contempt, and anger – the “hostility triad” (Izard 1977) – share similarities, as they all involve rejection and evaluation of the other as inferior. They function to maintain social divisions, particularly in relation to social class and race (see also Ahmed 2004).

At the first stage of our analysis of disgust, we directed our attention toward the disgust reactions and judgmental gaze directed at Ariell as a public figure and the mother of a newborn. We also noticed that Ariell’s act of revealing her negative emotions and making them public further triggered disgust and contempt. Disgust and related emotions were expressed in online communications in varying ways. Sometimes the expression was direct and verbal, as in “yuck!” or “I’m repulsed/sickened/disgusted by . . .” Contempt and hate were often expressed indirectly through sarcasm and irony, but also in rather straightforward language that had a moralizing and contemptuous tone. Sometimes emotional intensities were heightened by the use of capital letters or emotionally loaded words.

In the second round of analysis, we analyzed the data in more detail to examine the objects of disgust. We found that disgust was also attached to figures other than Ariell, such as other mothers, and to societal norms and discourses. Here it was evident that commenters sought to generate certain emotional responses in order to push the discussion in new directions (e.g. Paasonen 2015). While we remained aware of the normative aspects that affective reactions and emotions entail, our analysis also demonstrated that emotions and affects were recruited for nonnormative purposes. Although emotions are closely aligned with the reproduction of social norms and relations, emotional reactions are not wholly determined by those norms and may take unexpected directions.

In line with MacLure (2013), during our analysis we were particularly interested in movements and entanglements within the data. Consequently, the expressions of disgust that caught our attention were not “representative” of the data, insofar as the data also contained a variety of other emotional responses (Mustosmäki and Sihto 2021). Rather, we understood these expressions of disgust as affective “hotspots” (MacLure 2013) that glowed in the data. However, in addition to our affective-discursive analysis, we also pinpointed affective intensities by examining upvotes and downvotes, which allowed us to evaluate the popularity of particular views.

Disgust Toward Ariell

In the discussion, disgust was often directed toward and attached to Ariell, who was labeled an unfit mother and located outside of the realm of respectable, middle-class maternal femininity. A recurring trigger of negative affective evaluations was Ariell’s body and appearance. There were references to her large visible tattoos, heavy makeup, and revealing clothing, which were treated as features that

made her an unfit mother who focused on her looks instead of her child. These reactions paralleled the visual and affective invitations that are familiar from reality TV: commenters based their judgments on small details (“close-ups”) of Ariell’s body parts, and on revelations about her personal life (Skeggs and Wood 2012). The reactions to Ariell’s physical appearance were dense with classed affect (cf. Kolehmainen 2017; Tyler 2008). References were made to excess, inauthenticity, and lack of taste (cf. Lawler 2004) that contradicted the normative, middle-class ideals of ordinariness, naturalness, and authenticity (e.g. Åberg 2020). As Lewis (2012) points out, part of the making of middle-class femininity is to render women who display the “wrong” kind of femininity disgusting. Commenters engaged in an evaluative process that Skeggs and Wood (2012) call “metonymic morality,” scrutinizing Ariell’s body parts and practices so that those details came to represent the whole person:

The fact that her Insta account is filled with pictures of her ass and tits is shocking in itself, but then she also has to underline that *_she has never liked babies_*. . . . Of course when you spend time putting on that face and taking pictures of whatever body parts, then the baby’s hunger, wet diaper, etc. will disturb you.
(606 upvotes, 61 downvotes)

Ariell’s appearance was seen as a signifier of selfishness – she prioritized her looks and her own needs over her child. This then came to signify “bad motherhood,” as the strong moral imperative is that mothers should always prioritize their children. Ariell was seen as failing to meet this imperative, and thus as failing at motherhood (e.g. Berg 2008). In the extract above, the intensity of the disgust and disapproval was further highlighted by the large number of upvotes – this comment was among those that received the most upvotes in the thread. However, to some extent the number of upvotes was partly explained by the comment’s being one of the earliest in the thread, as comments posted at the beginning of a discussion usually garner more attention than those posted later.

In the thread, Ariell was also judged for excessive alcohol use and for not doing housework:

According to the story, sometimes she goes to bars and drinks with both hands. Apparently someone else takes care of the baby every now and then. How much [does] the dad participate in childcare? I assume Sini does not clean or do housework.

(Votes unavailable)

This comment exemplified the process of metonymic morality, as details about Ariell’s private life were extended to signal other private shortcomings: she lacked proper maternal behavior, therefore she failed at proper homemaking. These aspects of maternity were affectively attached to each other (Ahmed 2004), although the blog post itself did not make any direct references to housekeeping practices in Ariell’s family.

Ariell was also deemed to have failed at appropriate maternal feelings, as she was interpreted as not liking babies and being disgusted by her child. Some commenters were disgusted by Ariell’s description of babies as “useless” and with “slime of all

colors oozing out of all holes.” Ariell’s own disgust toward the baby’s bodily fluids was greeted with irritation, contempt, and even anger. Babies’ needs were naturalized, and it was considered a mother’s duty to control her own feelings of disgust. Furthermore, Ariell was interpreted as expressing hatred toward her child, which prompted anger and dismay:

[It is] childish, self-centered, and cruel toward one’s own child to vent one’s hate for babies publicly. . . . She should stop bawling. That is extremely childish as well.

(22 upvotes, two downvotes)

Consequently, moral disgust was directed toward Ariell’s presumed failures at “proper” maternal behavior and bonding with her child. The disgust and dismay were often intertwined with worries about the child’s future. In order to distance themselves from Ariell’s mothering practices, the commenters drew distinctions between themselves and her, underlining that they themselves had never had such problems (see also Skeggs 2004, 2005).

Disgust Toward Public Maternal Complaint

In some of the comments, what was seen as disgusting was the act of sharing difficult maternal experiences and feelings publicly. Moral judgment and contempt were expressed through sarcastic expressions, while some comments manifested disgust in more straightforward expressions of revulsion (such as “oh vomit!”) (see also Pantti 2016). Ariell’s blog post was dubbed “public vomit,” “churning out,” or “defecation,” and was thereby framed as an uncontrollable public outburst:

Oh vomit! Everyday life with a baby is tough, but does one have to defecate this all onto social media?

(15 upvotes, three downvotes)

In addition to disgust, related emotions of contempt and anger were also to be found in the comments. Here again, it was the act of sharing one’s feelings publicly that violated the norms of motherhood, rather than the feelings themselves:

It is ok to feel that way. It is ok to speak about one’s feelings openly to one’s spouse and friends. It is NOT ok to write all of one’s private business publicly on social media. Nice for the child to read them when she’s older. Not. Shame on you, Sini Ariell.

(21 upvotes, three downvotes)

Shame, like disgust, is a response to something that is perceived as morally wrong, and it involves the judgment of others (Ahmed 2004). Ariell was shamed for publicly expressing her feelings. Moral judgment was especially present when attention was directed toward her child. Ariell was seen to have crossed a line between public and private that should not have been crossed for the child’s sake. A recurring theme in the thread was the worry that Ariell’s child might find what her mother had written about her and be traumatized by it when she was older.

These reactions to Ariell’s crossing the line between public and private could be interpreted as classed. Keeping the difficulties of family life private has been considered part of the ideal of the middle-class family (e.g. Nätkin 1997). Although the act of publicly sharing supposedly private matters mostly attracted disgust, there was also a plethora of supportive reactions that recognized the existence of difficult aspects and feelings of motherhood (for more detail, see Mustosmäki and Sihto 2021) and applauded Ariell’s bravery in stepping forward. However, commenters that voiced such support for Ariell then became targets of dismay, contempt, and disgust themselves:

Nice that a group of a similar kind [of women] go along with this full-mouthed broad on FB [Facebook].

(19 upvotes, four downvotes)

Supportive commenters became affectively attached to Ariell, forming a group of a “similar kind of women” whose feelings and behavior were judged. Similarly, Ariell’s blog became affectively aligned with the wider public discussion of motherhood, and was seen as representing public maternal complaint and the “negative discussion” of family life. In some comments, a “culture of negativity” was seen as having permeated all spheres of life:

I rather feel that there is a right to complain about everything these days, and to bring out the negative sides, but when it concerns for example children, it is supposedly hypocritical to say that children – including teenagers, whom everyone seems to find appalling – are for me an enormous source of joy.

(40 upvotes, four downvotes)

This type of comment claimed that complaining had become so widespread that there was no room for positive discussions of family life. As mentioned above, Finnish media constantly blame the “negative branding” of family life for the country’s low fertility rate, which has become an object of moral anxiety (HS 2018, 2021; IL 2018). Consequently, some commenters expressed anxiety that Ariell’s blog post might mobilize affects among childless people that would negatively influence their intention to have children. Thus, it was feared that the affects Ariell’s blog mobilized would spill over into wider society (Ahmed 2004; Wood 2018), threatening the “brand” of family life. In some comments, contempt and disgust were attached not only to Ariell but also to mothers who were seen as similar to her, who were framed as bringing shame to the nation (cf. Tyler 2008):

All I can say is that I don’t understand “mothers” these days. . . . The biggest threat to the future of Finland is not Russia or any kind of economic recession, but the stupidity and laziness of people.

(29 upvotes, 11 downvotes)

The intensity of negative affects attached to mothers and public maternal complaint was heightened by references to contemporary cultural phenomena as well as nostalgia for the past. In these comments, mothers were seen as unable to put their own needs aside and were labeled flaky and lazy. The intensity of negative affects attached

to contemporary mothers and their presumed weakness was heightened by allusions to Finnish history and grand narratives of the national crises the country had faced.

Disgust Toward “Perfect Mothers” and Pronatalist Discourses

When we followed the trajectories of negative affects as the discussion progressed, we found that some commenters also reacted with disgust and irritation to comments that criticized Ariell. Some were disgusted by those that sought to silence public maternal complaint, and some were disgusted by overtly positive discourses of family life, which they perceived as fake:

Just let it go, you hypocrites. I'm more sickened by the mamas who churn out some dreamy over-the-top love bullshit.

(11 upvotes, 19 downvotes)

In these comments, negative feelings were seen as inherent to motherhood. These commenters further questioned whether “perfect mothers” might actually be hiding their true feelings:

Oh come on . . . I say that she [Ariell] is healthier than some mother who has forced herself to be calm, who with her lips clenched into a thin line sings a lullaby to her child thinking that the child does not sense her inner anger. Finland is full of these angry mamas and depressed children.

(Votes unavailable)

While some comments saw Ariell's feelings, and her public sharing of them, as threatening, here the repression of negative feelings was interpreted as an even more serious threat. Disgust and moral anxiety were directed back at, and thus attached to, these “perfect mothers.” These mothers were deemed to be performing a role and being inauthentic. Their investments in motherhood and choices were moralized, as they were seen to be using their children as objects for self-validation:

I'm disgusted by this type of mother. They are not good mothers, they just put on an act, and [for them] children are just objects on display, used to seek approval and closeness. Love is not the first thing that springs to mind in connection with these moms. Sini will be a real mother who will give real love, not a poser who just performs some mama role like these hypocrites on this thread.

(19 upvotes, 23 downvotes)

This change in the tone of the discussion, whereby disgust became attached to and directed at “perfect mothers,” arguably reveals that the value system of the middle classes is not completely accepted, and that respectability as a mother continues to be a site of struggle. As Skeggs (2004) has documented, being pretentious is a sin for the working-class, while authenticity is seen as a moral virtue. Through these affects, which directed hate and disgust back at “perfect” and presumably middle-class mothers, commenters were trying to generate value for themselves and their own practices, which might diverge from middle-class norms (see also Ahmed 2004; Skeggs and Wood 2012). However, these comments often received more downvotes than upvotes,

indicating that disgust toward “perfect mothers” was met with more mixed responses than disgust toward Ariell or public maternal complaint.

The affects set in motion by “perfect mothers” were also seen as causing women to hesitate over whether to enter motherhood. The idea of having to align oneself with “perfect mothers” or their lifestyle was deemed disgusting:

This is exactly the group of mothers that is one of the reasons why I’m not sure if I want to have children at all. I’m disgusted with the idea that I should identify with them.

(Votes unavailable)

Many commenters recognized a pronatalist affective atmosphere that encouraged or pressured women to have children and to accept the changes that motherhood would entail. However, disgust, contempt, and annoyance were further directed toward commenters who essentialized motherhood or emphasized the cultural narrative that “normal women” would eventually grow into motherhood even if they became pregnant unintentionally (e.g. Shelton and Johnson 2006). These reactions of annoyance at pronatalist discourses shed light on resistance:

I think this text is a good opening for voluntary childlessness. Many who become pregnant by accident feel pressure to keep the child and “grow up,” “give up navel-gazing,” etc. I wish that after this kind of statement, people with the mentality of Antti Rinne would think twice before they started to demand that those who have chosen childlessness should start a joint effort to have babies or some other crap.

(14 upvotes, zero downvotes)

This commenter emphasized that it might not be wise to pressure women into motherhood. Although the comment contained disdain for Ariell’s blog post, more intense affects of irritation and dismay were directed toward figures that engaged in pronatalist discourses. Pronatalism was affectively attached to Antti Rinne, a member of parliament and former leader of the Social Democratic Party. This was a reference to another media upheaval that had taken place earlier in 2017, when Rinne expressed his worry over the declining fertility rate and called on citizens to make an active contribution. His speech was seen to assume that childbearing was a national duty, and in social media it was even compared to the politics portrayed in the dystopian novel and TV serial *The Handmaid’s Tale* (MTV3 2017). This intertextual reference further intensified the disgust and negative affects directed at pronatalist discourses in the thread. By attaching negative affect – namely, disgust – to pronatalist attitudes, commenters aimed to push the discussion in new directions.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have traced the reactions of disgust that Ariell’s blog post generated on an anonymous online discussion board. Our affective-discursive analysis revealed that Ariell was made a vessel for anxieties and moral judgments circulating around contemporary motherhood: the disgust, contempt, and hatred directed toward her clearly sought to reinforce hegemonic middle-class norms of motherhood. These

judgments further highlighted the ambiguous nature of disgust: while the disgusting other was rejected, the affective practices in the online discussion invited others both to share that affective relation to the other and to gain pleasure from the judgment (Ahmed 2004; Ngai 2005).

Our analysis also revealed the cultural unease around public expressions of negative maternal emotions. The discussion around Ariell's public account of her difficult experiences and emotions as a mother can be read as symptomatic of an explosion of anxiety about increasing public maternal complaint and dropping fertility rates in Finland. The moral disgust at Ariell's blog post seemed to emerge from the fear that her openness would be contagious and contaminate (m)others (Ahmed 2004; Wood 2018), undermining the "brand" of family life and leading prospective parents to opt out of having children due to the "unrealistically" negative public discussion of family life and motherhood. Moral disgust was mobilized to silence public maternal complaint and maintain the existing social order and social hierarchies.

Interestingly, the disgust expressed toward Ariell's post was mostly triggered by what commenters perceived to be moral and social transgressions. The commenters did not react with disgust to the parts of the original post that contained common, visible markers of bodily disgust, e.g. the "leaky" maternal body ("milk running out of your tits") or physical changes such as liver spots. Instead, the disgust was more often directed toward Ariell herself, who was interpreted as being disgusted by her own leaking body and the leaking body of her baby. These reactions recalled another social media uproar that had taken place the year before. In 2016, another Finnish celebrity had faced a backlash after expressing disgust toward public breastfeeding. As Lehto's (2019) analysis of this "scandal" showed, disgust was more often and more intensively attached to the celebrity who had expressed disgust toward the "leaking" maternal body than it was to leaking maternal body itself. Our findings also underline the normative and social aspects and functions of disgust: the maternal body per se is less uncontrollable or threatening to the social order than "improper" maternal behavior or public maternal complaint, which are perceived as contagious and dangerous.

However, disgust also took other directions. It was attached to "perfect mothers" who highlighted the positive sides of maternal experience and demonstrated their own investment in normative maternity and the "happy object" of family life (Ahmed 2010). Disgust was further directed toward pronatalist discourses and the figures that promoted them. Thus, disgust was mobilized to challenge the existing moral and social order. Consequently, disgust not only functioned to protect what was seen as good or pure, but was also mobilized as a form of resistance (Kosonen 2020). These "revolting tactics" appeared in the forum thread discussed in this chapter: those deemed disgusting sought to redefine the category of "disgusting." However, as Kosonen (2020) points out, it is important to ask how far these tactics succeed in challenging the social order, as such signs and affective practices do not have the same historical and affectively sticky genealogies of meaning that make majoritarian emotions so powerful. Similarly, in our study, the assignment of negative value to "perfect mothers" and the expectation that negative maternal feelings should be kept private had less "disgust-ability" than public maternal complaint or the figure of Ariell herself (Kosonen 2020). This can also be seen in the distribution of upvotes and downvotes in the thread: comments that expressed disgust toward "perfect mothers" received more

mixed responses. As Ngai (2005, 353) elegantly puts it, “disgust does not so much solve the problem of social powerlessness as diagnose it powerfully.”

Our analysis of disgust reactions around Ariell’s blog post reveals the broader cultural conjuncture we are living in, as well as struggles over the norms of contemporary motherhood, which include anxiety and discomfort around questions of care and reproduction. Yet public exposure to the unhappy effects of the promise of happiness (Ahmed 2010) can be affirmative, since it can provide us with alternative ways of imagining what might indeed be a good or better life.

References

- Åberg, E. 2020. *Keeping up Appropriate Appearances: Physical Appearance, Social Norms, and Gender in Finland*. Turun yliopiston julkaisuja – Sarja B – Osa, 525. Turku: University of Turku.
- Abitan, A. and S. Krauth-Gruber. 2015. “The Two Sides of Disgust: A Lexical and Thematic Content Analysis of Narratives of Personally Experienced Physical and Moral Disgust.” *Social Science Information* 54 (4): 470–496.
- Ahmed, S. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. London: Routledge.
- Ahmed, S. 2010. *The Promise of Happiness*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Ariell, S. 2017. “Fuck This Shit.” *Sini Ariell* (blog), 11 December 2017. Accessed 18 March 2021: <http://siniariell.blogspot.com/2017/12/fuck-this-shit.html>.
- Berg, K. 2008. *Äitiys kulttuurisina odotuksina: Väestöntutkimuslaitoksen julkaisusarja D 48*. Helsinki: Väestöliitto.
- Berlant, L. 2008. *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Erola, J., editor. 2010. *Luokaton Suomi? Yhteiskuntaluokat 2000-luvun Suomessa*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Hammond, N. 2018. “Researching Men Who Pay for Sex: Using Online Methods for Recruiting and Interviewing.” *Methodological Innovations* 11 (1): 1–11.
- Hays, S. 1996. *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Hiihola, J. 2015. *Hallittu vanhemmuus: Sukupuoli, luokka ja etnisyyt huostaanottoasiakirjoissa*. Acta Universitatis Tamperensis 2026. Tampere: University of Tampere.
- HS. 2017. “Mielikuva automarketissa ravaavasta ‘prisma-perheestä’ lykkää lapsentekoa: Kolme-nelikymmppisten ruuhka-vuodet pakkautuvat yhä lyhyempään jaksoon.” *HS*, 12 December 2017. Accessed 1 March 2021: www.hs.fi/kotimaa/art-2000005486892.html.
- HS. 2018. “Johtuuko syntyvyyden romahtaminen siitä, että lapsista puhutaan niin usein voivotellen? Tässä vastapainoksi neljä plussaa.” *HS*, 6 May 2018. Accessed 1 March 2021: www.hs.fi/mielipide/art-2000005669116.html.
- HS. 2021. “Onnellinen perhe.” *HS*, 12 December 2021. Accessed 1 March 2021: www.hs.fi/perhe/art-2000007796502.html.
- IL. 2018. “Tutkimus selvitti, mistä johtuu lapsikato: Matkustelu ja unelmaelämä kiinnostavat ‘prisma-arkea enemmän’.” *IL*, 16 May 2018. Accessed 1 March 2021: www.iltalehti.fi/perheartikkelit/201805162200948248_pt.shtml.
- Jaworska, C. 1977. *Human Emotions*. New York: Springer.
- Jaworska, S. 2018. “‘Bad’ Mums Tell the ‘Untellable’: Narrative Practices and Agency in Online Stories about Postnatal Depression on Mumsnet.” *Discourse, Context and Media* 25: 25–33.
- Jensen, T. 2013. “‘Mumsnetiquette’: Online Affect within Parenting Culture.” In *Privilege, Agency, and Affect. Understanding the Production and Effects of Action*, edited by C. Maxwell and P. Aggleton, 127–145. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Kolehmainen, M. 2017. “The Material Politics of Stereotyping White Trash: Flexible Class-Making.” *Sociological Review* 65 (2): 251–266.

- Kosonen, H. 2020. "In Thinking Counter-Hegemonic Disgust." *Promise of Monsters* (blog), 26 June 2020. Accessed 1 March 2021: <https://themonsternetwork.com/2020/06/26/in-thinking-counter-hegemonic-disgust/>.
- Lawler, S. 2004. "Rules of Engagement: Habitus, Power and Resistance." *Sociological Review* 52 (2 supp.): 110–128.
- Lawler, S. 2005. "Disgusted Subjects: The Making of Middle-Class Identities." *Sociological Review* 53 (3): 429–446.
- Lehto, M. 2019. "Bare Flesh and Sticky Milk: An Affective Conflict over Public Breastfeeding." *Social Media + Society* 5 (4). <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119881696>
- Lewis, P. 2012. "Post-Feminism and Entrepreneurship: Interpreting Disgust in a Female Entrepreneurial Narrative." In *Dirty Work: Concepts and Identities*, edited by R. Simpson, N. Slutskaya, P. Lewis, and H. Höpfl, 223–238. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Littler, J. 2019. "Mothers Behaving Badly: Chaotic Hedonism and the Crisis of Neoliberal Social Reproduction." *Cultural Studies* 34 (4): 499–520.
- MacLure, M. 2013. "Classification or Wonder? Coding as an Analytic Practice in Qualitative Research." In *Deleuze and Research Methodologies*, edited by R. Coleman and J. Ringrose, 164–183. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Miller, W.I. 1997. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moore, A. 2016. "Shame on You: The Role of Shame, Disgust and Humiliation in Media Representations of 'Gender-Fraud' Cases." *Sociological Research Online* 21 (2): 118–135.
- MTV3. 2017. "Antti Rinteen 'synnytystalkoot' pöyristytti demaritkin: 'Toi mieleen kolmannen valtakunnan ja kansallissosialismin'." *MTV3*, 23 August 2017. Accessed 18 March 2021: www.mtvuutiset.fi/artikkeli/antti-rinteen-synnytystalkoot-poyristytti-demaritkin-toi-mieleen-kolmannen-valtakunnan-ja-kansallissosialismin/6547168.
- Mustosmäki, A. and T. Sihto. 2021. "F*** This Shit" – Negotiating the Boundaries of Public Expression of Mother's Negative Feelings." *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* 29 (3): 216–228. <http://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2021.1921844>.
- Nätkin, R. 1997. *Kamppailu suomalaisesta äitiydestä: Maternalismi, väestöpolitiikka ja naisten kertomukset*. Helsinki: Gaudeamus.
- Ngai, S. 2005. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- OSF. 2019. "Preliminary Population Statistics." *Statistics Finland*. Accessed 1 March 2021: www.stat.fi/til/vamuu/2018/12/vamuu_2018_12_2019-0129_tie_001_en.html.
- Paasonen, S. 2015. "A Midsummer's Bonfire: Affective Intensities of Online Debate." In *Networked Affect*, edited by K. Hillis, S. Paasonen, and M. Petit, 27–42. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Pantti, M. 2016. "'Despicable, Disgusting, Repulsive!!!' Public Emotions and Moralities in Online Discussions about Violence Towards Refugees." *Javnost: The Public* 23 (4): 363–381.
- Perrier, M. 2013. "Middle-Class Mothers' Moralities and 'Concerted Cultivation': Class Others, Ambivalence and Excess." *Sociology* 47 (4): 655–670.
- Roberts, L.D. 2015. "Ethical Issues in Conducting Qualitative Research in Online Communities." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 12 (3): 314–325.
- Russell, P.S. and R. Giner-Sorolla. 2013. "Bodily Moral Disgust: What It Is, How It Is Different from Anger, and Why It Is an Unreasoned Emotion." *Psychological Bulletin* 139 (2): 328–351.
- Shelton, N. and S. Johnson. 2006. "'I Think Motherhood for Me Was a Bit Like a Double-Edged Sword': The Narratives of Older Mothers." *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology* 16 (4): 316–330.
- Skeggs, B. 2004. *Class, Self, Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Skeggs, B. 2005. "The Making of Class and Gender through Visualizing Moral Subject Formation." *Sociology* 39 (5): 965–982.
- Skeggs, B. and H. Wood. 2012. *Reacting to Reality Television: Performance, Audience, and Value*. London: Routledge.

- Tyler, I. 2008. “‘Chav Mum Chav Scum’: Class Disgust in Contemporary Britain.” *Feminist Media Studies* 8 (1): 17–34.
- Tyler, I. 2013. *Revolting Subjects: Social Abjection and Resistance in Neoliberal Britain*. London: Zed Books.
- Vauva.fi. 2021. “Keskustelalueen säännöt.” *Vauva.fi*. Accessed 1 March 2021: www.vauva.fi/artikkeli/keskustelalueen-saannot.
- Wetherell, M. 2012. *Affect and Emotion: A New Social Science Understanding*. London: Sage.
- Wood, H. 2018. “The Magaluf Girl: A Public Sex Scandal and the Digital Class Relations of Social Contagion.” *Feminist Media Studies* 18 (4): 626–642.