Chapter 5. Discourses of gendered parenthood in Mumsnet Talk

In chapter 2, I showed that powerful social forces have long worked to position parents in restrictive gendered subject positions that revolve around the ideal of the ‘intensive’ mother, who is expected to be the primary carer for her children, completely child-centred, and self-sacrificing. I showed that expectations of women in western contexts have subtly shifted over time, with consumerism, for example, increasingly shaping the image of the ‘good mother’ in recent years, but that ideals about motherhood continue to be moulded by the core values of intensive motherhood. Scholarship has shown that these continuing expectations are highly problematic, making it difficult for parents to have equal access to caring and working practices, and restricting the scope of who and what is deemed ‘good’ parenting (and especially mothering). Explorations of gender, parenting and motherhood to date, however, have rarely been specific about how discourses such as ‘intensive mothering’ or ‘child-centredness’ operate in everyday life, what specific forms they take and how they merge and inter-relate. This chapter works to address that gap.

The analysis and findings that are presented in this chapter are important for two primary reasons. First, they reveal eight discourses that capture key insights about the social norms, expectations and assumptions parents are navigating in a digital age. These discourses are named as ‘gendered parenthood’, ‘child-centric motherhood’, ‘mother as main parent’, ‘absent fathers’, ‘commercialized motherhood’, ‘classed motherhood’, ‘equal parenting’ and ‘individuality’. Each section of this chapter introduces one of these discourses, detailing the forms of knowledge and subjectivity they produce, the power relations they inscribe, and some of the specific linguistic mechanisms through which they operate. I also show how each discourse both relates to, and further specifies the nature of, other discourses and themes identified in the wider literature. Second, the findings presented in this chapter are important because they emphasize the significance and pervasiveness of ‘gendered parenthood’, a discourse that is at once both new, because it has not yet been specifically named, yet also established, because it underpins a range of other discourses and key themes around gender and parenthood that have been identified in the literature. I demonstrate that ‘gendered parenthood’ is an overarching discourse that produces, merges and competes with the further specific discourses that are outlined in each section, thus revealing that gender is central to the ways

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1 The eight discourses that are presented in this chapter are first introduced in Mackenzie (2017a), which focuses on analysis of the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread, and explores the discourses of ‘gendered parenthood’, ‘child-centric motherhood’, ‘commercialized motherhood’ (previously named ‘commercialization’) and ‘classed motherhood’, and Mackenzie (2018), which presents analysis of the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, and introduces ‘mother as main parent’, ‘absent fathers’, ‘equal parenting’ and ‘individuality’. In this chapter I draw on, elaborate, and bring together the analyses and insights that were first presented in these publications. Aspects of these articles are reproduced with the permission of SAGE Publications (Mackenzie, 2017a) and Equinox Publishing Ltd. (Mackenzie, 2018).
in which individuals can negotiate a position for themselves as parents within Mumsnet Talk. The chapter aims to expose and scrutinize the multiple ways in which discourses of ‘gendered parenthood’ operate, and by doing so, to challenge the potentially restrictive gendered assumptions and expectations that dominate Mumsnet users’ sense of what it means to be a parent and a mother in a digital age.

Gendered parenthood
‘Gendered parenthood’ is identified here as a discourse that works to fix individuals who are parents in distinct, binary subject positions along gendered lines: as mothers and fathers. It can be subsumed within the overarching discourse of ‘gender differentiation’, which positions ‘men’ and ‘women’ as separate and different (Baxter, 2003; see chapter 2). Researchers across the social sciences have long been pointing to discourses that inscribe restrictive forms of knowledge about what is expected of ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’, such as ‘good mothering’ and ‘involved fatherhood’ (Miller, 2007, 2011; see chapter 2). However, none have yet named ‘gendered parenthood’ as an overarching discourse that captures and prevails across all of these discursive formations, in the same way that ‘gender differentiation’ underlines the persistent division of people as ‘male’ and ‘female’ across different spheres. Explicitly identifying and naming this discourse is important because it emphasizes the profoundly gendered ways in which forms of knowledge and subjectivity around parenthood are constructed and conceptualized within (and beyond) Mumsnet Talk. In this section, I show how this discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ is manifested in the Mumsnet Talk threads ‘Your identity as a mother’ and ‘Can we have a child exchange?’, before outlining five further discourses of gendered parenthood in the sub-sections that follow. By identifying and analyzing these discourses and indicating the linguistic mechanisms through which they operate, I draw attention to some of the specific ways in which forms of knowledge about gender, parenthood and family life are produced, and individuals are positioned as gendered parental subjects.

For most contributors to the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, ‘mum’ seems to be the default subject position. This position is often taken up quite explicitly, towards the start of contributors’ posts, through pronouns and categories. For example, in the following excerpts, contributors all employ some variation of the clause ‘I am mum’, where the personal pronoun ‘I’ is in the grammatical position of the subject and the category ‘mum’ or ‘mother’ is in the grammatical position of the complement, so that ‘I’ and ‘mother’ are equated directly.

Post 4. Loopylouu. I’ve been a mother for so long
Post 12. IdealistAndProudOfIt. I’m a mum to 2 under5s (sic)
Post 72. museumum. I am ‘mum’ a lot of the time
Post 84. Bedsheets4knickers. I’m a mother of 2

Of course, it is not surprising that these contributors tend to take up the subject position ‘mum’, given the context in which they are interacting; the title of the Mumsnet website itself legitimizes ‘mum/mother’ as the obvious, common sense subject position available to its users. It is therefore likely to be difficult for members of this site to completely escape the overarching discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’, although there are moments at which they take up other subject positions,

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2 As noted in chapter 4, all extracts from Mumsnet Talk are reproduced with the permission of both the individual authors of the posts, and Mumsnet Limited. The majority of usernames are reproduced as in the original posts, but some are pseudonyms, at participants’ requests.
such as the gender-neutral ‘parent’ or the individualistic ‘I’, which will be explored later in this chapter, in relation to the discourses of ‘equal parenting’ and ‘individuality’.

A discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ is also evident in the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread, although it is not so immediately identifiable. In the above examples, users take up direct indices of gender when they adopt the subject position mum/mother. In ‘Can we have a child exchange’, participants do not self-identify in this way at all, but they can be said to use indirect indices of gender: resources that have come, through shared socio-cultural knowledge and repetition, to be associated with a particular group or identity (Ochs, 1992), such as mothers, Catholics, or working class men. Gender and language research has offered insights as to what such linguistic and communicative indices of gender might look like. Holmes and Stubbe (2003: 574), for example, draw on the claims of early research in this field (e.g. Coates, 1988, 1996; Fishman, 1983; Holmes, 1984; Lakoff, 1975) when showing that a competitive, autonomous and referentially oriented style has tended to be culturally associated with masculinity, whereas an indirect, facilitative, collaborative and affectively oriented style has been tied to notions of femininity. ‘Affective’ behaviour and interactional styles have also been linked with western ideals of ‘good’ motherhood, which tend to position women as ‘natural’ carers and nurturers (Gillies, 2007; Lawler, 2000; Wall, 2010; see chapter 2). Although such claims have been widely criticized for their simplistic and generalized polarisation of ‘men’ and ‘women’ as opposites, who have predictable, fixed linguistic habits (Cameron, 1996; Cameron and Coates, 1989; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 1992), they continue to have currency in a contemporary context, offering a surprisingly accurate reflection of ‘societal expectations and norms of appropriate gendered behaviour’ (Mills and Mullany, 2011: 53).

Contributors to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ can be said to index the cultural stereotype that women orient towards the expression of moods, feelings and attitudes in their talk, through their use of ‘affectively oriented’ resources (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). For example, contributors to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ frequently deploy what Lakoff (1975: 13) calls ‘empty’ adjectives in descriptions of their children, using words such as ‘charming’, ‘sweet’, ‘lovely’, ‘delightful’ and ‘cute’ to describe them in positive, loving terms that ‘express approbation in terms of one’s own personal emotional reaction’. These resources are re-named here as affective adjectives, a term that more directly relates to their function and does not carry the same negative implications as Lakoff’s original label. Contributors also make frequent use of intensifying adverbs such as ‘very’, ‘extremely’, ‘truly’ and ‘exceptionally’ to emphasize the intensive nature of their feelings. Further, in the digital context of the Mumsnet Talk forum, contributors have various typographical resources at their disposal, including italics, bold, capitals, punctuation and emojis, which have often been linked with stereotypically ‘feminine’ interactional styles in new media research. For example, Wolf’s (2000) research on U.S. online newsgroups suggests that women use more emoticons than men to express emotion, solidarity, support and positive feelings, and Vaisman’s (2013) study of Israeli blogs shows that users perform glamorous, desirable ‘girliness’ through play with font and typography, together with a range of other linguistic resources. The following excerpts are illustrative of participants’ affective style when describing their children in this thread, through their use of a range of affectively oriented resources.
The pervasiveness of an affectively oriented style across the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread can be said to both draw upon and reinforce the indexical ties between femininity, motherhood and affective behaviour (especially towards children). If contributors and readers recognize these ties, the adoption of this style will position the authors as female parents: as mothers, who are describing their children in a way that is consistent with cultural expectations of women and mothers, particularly in a western context. This claim, however, is a tentative one: indirectly indexical resources, by their very nature, cannot be exclusively linked to one social function or subject position, and they are likely to rely on local, as well as more global, meanings and assumptions (Agha, 2007; Bucholtz, 2009; Johnstone and Kiesling, 2008). Contributors’ use of what I describe here as an ‘affectively oriented’ style may therefore be interpreted in different ways, since ‘femininity’ and ‘good motherhood’ are not oriented around emotions, personal connections and sensitivity for all people at all times. It may be, for example, that contributors use these resources primarily to emphasize their love for and personal responses to their children, as I will suggest in my exploration of the discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’, below. The variable and context-dependent nature of indexical meanings, both in general, and in the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread, is explored in more detail in Mackenzie (2017a). Another important consideration here is that contributors may orient to the gendered connotations of these resources in an ironic and subversive way. This interpretation would certainly be consistent with the playful, humorous tone of the thread (see further discussion below and in chapter 6).

Mumsnet users’ adoption of direct and indirect indices of gender in both discussions of their parental identities and descriptions of their children is a key indicator that ‘gendered parenthood’ is a central, dominant discourse in the two threads explored here. Five further discourses of gendered parenthood, which rely on the differentiation of parents in gendered terms before further positioning them in specific ways, are outlined in the sections that follow.

**Mother as main parent and absent fathers**

‘Mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ are identified here as separate discourses that often form a complementary pair because the forms of knowledge and subjectivity that they produce work to reinforce one another, inscribing oppositional, unequal power relations between men and women who are parents. Through the positioning of mothers as ‘main parents’, who have primary responsibility for their children, fathers are positioned, by implication, as secondary parents. When fathers are absent, completely excluded from the family sphere, women’s position as the ‘main parent’ is reinforced. The identification of these discourses is consistent with the ‘common sense’ assumption that women are the ‘natural’, primary carers for children. It also echoes Sunderland’s (2000, 2004) identification of a ‘Part-time Father/ Mother as main parent’ combination discourse, introduced in chapter 2, which positions mothers as the parent with primary responsibility for a child’s upbringing, and fathers in a supporting role. There are two key distinctions, however,
between the pair of discourses identified here, and by Sunderland (2000, 2004). First, the ‘absent fathers’ discourse emphasizes the way fathers are often positioned not just as ‘part-time’ parents, but are completely excluded from parental subject positions in Mumsnet Talk interactions. This discourse is therefore identified through close attention to absences in the text; to what (or in this case, who) could have been, but is not, present (Sunderland, 2000; van Leeuwen, 1995, 1996; see discussion in chapters 2 and 4). The second distinction is that I name ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ as separate discourses, rather than a combination discourse, even though they persistently merge with and affirm one another in the threads analyzed here. I do this because the ‘mother as main parent’ discourse can still be evidenced even where fathers are very much present in an interaction. Naming these discourses separately also facilitates an analysis of the positioning of men and fathers in their own right, not just in relation to what they reveal about the positioning of women and mothers. Thus, I allow space for a wider range of perspectives, including those that are relatively marginalized in these interactions. This section demonstrates some of the linguistic mechanisms through which the ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ discourses operate in the Mumsnet Talk threads. As with ‘gendered parenthood’, these discourses are identified largely through close scrutiny of referential devices, especially pronouns.

The ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ discourses operate most persistently through the continual elision of men and fathers in both ‘Your identity as a mother’ and ‘Can we have a child exchange?’, in which there are very few references to fathers, or indeed any other male adults. The absence of men and fathers is particularly marked in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. The title and opening post of this thread (extract 5.1.) very clearly sets out pandarific’s concern with women’s parental identities, as mothers.

Extract 5.1. Opening post from ‘Your identity as a mother’

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

In pandarific’s direct appeals to the reader, her use of gender-specific references to ‘mother’ and ‘mum’, together with the second person pronouns ‘you’ and ‘your’, presupposes that her readers are all female parents, thus constraining the parameters for appropriate participation in this thread. Unsurprisingly, all contributors to this thread subsequently do present themselves as women, and most, as mothers (although some do not adopt the subject position mum/mother, identifying themselves instead as ‘parents’, or someone who ‘has children’). They also 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 (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 | Third person singular feminine pronouns ‘she’, | First person plural pronouns ‘we’, ‘our’, ‘ourselves’ | Third person singular feminine pronouns ‘she’, |
The figure of 941 singular references to the self in this thread is particularly 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. It may of course be the case that there are no male carers in some contributors’ lives; as mentioned in chapter 3, the details of participants’ backgrounds and circumstances are not known, beyond what is presented in their posts. Nevertheless, this is a marked absence, pointing either to an actual absence of male carers, or a presence that is not acknowledged in these posts.

Many posts to ‘Your identity as a mother’, such as the one written by cakesonatrain (extract 5.2), almost exclusively employ first person singular pronouns. This pattern often implies that the contributor has total responsibility for their children, and either points to the absence, or disregards the potential existence, of any other parent or carer. Cakesonatrain’s use of the gendered terms ‘breastfeeding’ (rather than, for example, the gender-neutral ‘feeding’) and ‘Mumming’ (as opposed to ‘parenting’) in line 2 also work to exclude male carers by constituting these tasks as gender-specific; integral to the role of ‘mum’.

Extract 5.2. Post 3 from ‘Your identity as a mother’ (first person singular pronouns in bold – my emphasis).

cakesonatrain Sun 01-Jun-14 15:07:15
1. I think I am almost entirely Mum. My dc [darling children] are still both under 3 so there's a lot of physical Mumming to do, with breastfeeding, nappies, carrying, bathing etc. I don't know if it will be less intense when they're older, and I might let myself be a bit more 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 predominance of first person singular pronouns and participants’ self-categorization as ‘mums’ in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, together with other linguistic strategies that exclude men as parents, is not surprising given pandarific’s exclusive emphasis on female parents in the title and opening post, and the website’s target audience. But there are several recurring statements that could logically break away from this singular emphasis on mothers, challenging the terms of the opening post. For example, within the clause ‘I have children’, which recurs in various forms across the thread, such as ‘I am expecting my first’ (post 85), the singular pronoun ‘I’ could easily be replaced with the plural ‘we’ or ‘our’, incorporating reference to the self and a second parent with little change to the content of the post. An alternative expression of this sentiment that can be
found in post 9, ‘we have only one child’, shows that it is possible to challenge the terms of the opening post whilst still offering a relevant response, through the use of plural pronoun reference.

The patterns of pronoun use in ‘Your identity as a mother’ imply that contributors to this thread have total responsibility for their children, whilst men are, by and large, erased as potentially relevant parental subjects. 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. Overall, it can be said that the linguistic patterns of reference in this thread both position contributors within the ‘mother as main parent’ discourse, as the main (or even sole) carers for their children, and also point to a discourse of exclusion, ‘absent fathers’. These discourses frequently intersect, merging with and reinforcing one another.

It is important to note that men and fathers are not completely absent from the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. On the rare occasions that they are made relevant, however, contributors often position themselves and their male partners as different and oppositional subjects, as MorningTimes does in post 19 (extract 5.3).

Extract 5.3. Post 19 from ‘Your identity as a mother’

MorningTimes Sun 01-Jun-14 20:29:39
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 [darling children] all day (plus a fourth who is at school during the day) so I just don't have the time or
3. the energy to be anyone else at the moment.
4. DH [darling husband] does a lot with the children too but at least he has a separate identity
5. because he is out at work and mixes with other people there.
6. I also struggle to spend time away from the DC for more than a night though. I have
7. friends who will happily go abroad on holiday without their DC but I just wouldn't want
8. to do that.

In this post, MorningTimes employs a range of pronouns and categories that constitute herself and her husband as distinct and separate subjects, within an overarching discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’. For example, she begins each of the three paragraphs of her post with a singular pronoun or noun phrase: ‘I’ (line 1), ‘DH’ (darling husband; line 5) and ‘I’ (line 7), which creates a clear graphological separation between the main subject of each paragraph. She also uses exclusively singular pronouns when referring to herself or her husband (never the more inclusive ‘we’), positioning herself and her ‘DH’ as separate individuals, rather than a joint unit. Furthermore, MorningTimes’ 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), but does not take up a parental subject position. The acronym ‘SAHM’ (stay-at-home-mum), further, positions her in the private sphere (‘at home’), whereas she positions her husband in an opposing ‘work’ space. MorningTimes therefore positions herself as the ‘main parent’, whose status as a parent determines who she is, whereas her husband’s only determines what he does. This polarized representation of male and female parents is not unusual in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread as a whole. Where contributors do make reference to men, they are often positioned as
different and separate, and it is the contributors, as mothers, who are fixed in a parental subjectivity - as the ‘main’ parents.

**Child-centric motherhood**

The persistence of social expectations about maternal ‘child-centredness’ has long been established in sociological research, and sometimes named as a pervasive discourse in western contexts (Wall, 2013; see chapter 2). This section reveals some of the specific ways in which a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’ works to position Mumsnet users as mothers who are both completely devoted and defined by their relation to their children, integrating the positions of the ‘child-centred’ and the ‘total’ mother (the way these positions merge is explicated in chapter 4). I focus, unlike most literature that deals with the theme of maternal child-centredness and sacrifice, on the ways in which a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’ restricts women’s access to a range of subject positions, by positioning them in relation to their children to the exclusion of all other potential roles and relations with others.

The exclusivity of the ‘child-centric mother’ subject position can be contrasted with the more flexible ‘mother’ subject position that is offered within a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’. For example, in post 102 of ‘Your identity as a mother’, Thurlow positions herself within a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ when she identifies herself as a female parent in the statement ‘*I am a mum*, a worker, a partner, a daughter and a friend’ (my emphasis). However, she also takes up other subject positions here: as a worker, partner, daughter and friend. In post 13 of the same thread, Crazym also takes up a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ when she states that ‘*being a mum is just a part of who I am, not the whole*’ (my emphasis). In these statements, both contributors conceptualize their identity as consisting of many ‘parts’, showing that a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ does not completely close down all possible ways of being an individual for them. As I will show in this section, however, a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’ does more dramatically limit the subject positions available to female parents.

The distinction between ‘gendered parenthood’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ can be clarified by examining contributors’ use of intensifiers in the following excerpts from ‘Your identity as a mother’. Here, intensifiers such as ‘100%’ and ‘almost entirely’ (highlighted in bold) suggest that these users’ relation to their children, as *mothers*, has total (or very near total) influence over their sense of self, is the *only* subject position available to them, and works to exclude them from all other subjectivities.

Post 3. *cakesonatrain*. I think I am **almost entirely** Mum.
Post 11. *EggNChips*. As soon as I became a mum, I was **100%** mum and loved it...
Post 16. *cakesonatrain*. I am **almost wholly** Mum,
Post 18. *Kath6151*. I have been **so intensely** mum for the last 10 months

There are also other ways in which contributors to ‘Your identity as a mother’ are positioned as ‘child-centric’, ‘total’ mothers. In the excerpts below, for example, the category ‘good mums’ (highlighted in bold) evaluates women in relation to their successful adoption of the subject position ‘mum’. The implication with both uses of this category is that ‘good mums’ devote themselves to their children, and to the role of ‘mother’. The negative construction ‘good mums don’t…’ and the bald, unmitigated statement ‘that’s what’s important’ work to imply that women’s positioning as child-centric mothers is imperative and fixed; that they do not have a choice but to be positioned in this way.
Post 59. Viglioso. good mums don’t, apparently, wear make-up: that money/time could be spent on PFB [precious first born].

Post 66. MrsPennyapple. Last night he responded with “but you’re a good mum, and that’s what’s important.”

A third way in which Mumsnet users are positioned as ‘child-centric mothers’ is through the implication that their children’s needs come first, whilst their own needs are secondary. This is an established trope of ‘intensive motherhood’ (see chapter 2) that is apparent in the excerpts from posts 59 and 66 of ‘Your identity as a mother’ that are presented above. Several contributors to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ also position themselves as ‘child-centric’ mothers through the implication that their children’s needs come before their own. In post 17 (extract 5.4), for example, MrsKoala describes her son as the instigator of quite violent actions, which she seems to passively accept.

Extract 5.4. Post 17 from ‘Can we have a child exchange?’

MrsKoala Wed 16-Jul-14 14:09:26
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 cushions then using your head as a trampoline. Taking off his nappy and doing a poo somewhere random in the house, smearing it over himself and everything while saying cheerily ‘a mess’ and ‘I did’.

Many of the processes MrsKoala attributes to her child imply negative evaluations, such as ‘biting’, which connotes aggression and animalistic behaviour, ‘insisting’, which suggests the child is controlling and forceful, and ‘smearing’, which has negative implications of irrevocable and far-reaching damage. These negative evaluations could in one sense work to distance MrsKoala from her child; nevertheless, she 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 passive role is further emphasized through her marked use of the second person pronouns ‘your’ and ‘you’ in reference to herself, where ‘my’ and ‘I’ would be more conventional. This use of pronouns works to distance MrsKoala from the situation she describes, further removing her from any agentic role in this interaction with her son. MrsKoala’s words therefore work to position her as a child-centric mother who makes sacrifices for her child, even as she emphasizes the negative impact his actions have on her life.

Similarly, in post 18 of ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ (extract 5.5), nordibird also takes up the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse by positioning herself as a passive participant in her interactions with her child.

Extract 5.5. Post 18 from ‘Can we have a child exchange?’

nordibird Wed 16-Jul-14 14:12:50
1. I’ll take the teenagers, will they fit in our spare room? I’d be perfect, I’m up to speed on the Hunger Games and stuff.
2. In exchange I’m offering a seven-month-old who’ll only sleep on you - perfect for anyone who misses baby snuggles! Will eat anything. Warning: Not suitably (sic) for anyone with back or neck problems.

Here, nordibird offers for (mock) exchange ‘a seven-month-old who’ll only sleep on you’ (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 nordibird frames this trait in positive terms with her (presumably tongue-in-cheek) claim that this child is ‘perfect for anyone who misses baby snuggles!’ (lines 3-4). Like MrsKoala, nordibird appears willing to suffer negative consequences in order to meet her child’s needs. Both participants’ complaints and negative evaluations of their children, although they are veiled by humour and irony, suggest that they resist being positioned as ‘child-centric mothers’ in any straightforward way. However, as in MrsKoala’s post, nordibird’s acceptance of these consequences draws attention to the difficulty of escaping the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse, which works to position participants in relation to their children throughout both of the threads analyzed here, even where they try to resist it.

Finally, the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse can be identified through Mumsnet users’ detailed descriptions of their children in the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread. Through these descriptions, the authors of these posts position themselves exclusively in relation to their children: any sense of who participants are is gained through an impression of who their children are. As the thread develops, contributors’ descriptions and evaluations come together to construct an image of the ‘perfect child’, 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. Contributors also frequently use affective adjectives such as ‘lovely’ and ‘delightful’, and intensifying adverbs such as ‘utterly’, to describe their children in positive terms. Such positive evaluations work to position participants as proud, loving parents who celebrate their children’s qualities and achievements: as child-centric mothers. The nature of the descriptions that are presented in ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ is further elaborated both in the section that follows, and in chapter 6.

**Commercialized motherhood**

Posts to the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread tend to adopt a relatively uniform style and structure, with participants introducing their children, describing their qualities and ‘offering’ them for exchange. These posts mimic classified advertisements: short written advertisements, often written by private sellers of second-hand goods, that are traditionally found in the ‘classified’ section of print newspapers. 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 Mumsnet’s goals of pooling knowledge, advice and support for parents (Mumsnet Limited, 2017). The genre of classified advertisements therefore serves, in this context, as a ‘frame’ (Goffman, 1974) that governs the organisation and shape of participants’ interactions, but without any expectation that the usual outcomes of classified advertisements will occur. This is a process of transposition that Goffman (1974) calls ‘keying’.

By keying the classified advertisement frame in ‘Can we have a child exchange?’’, contributors create a humorous, ironic tone that makes multiple possible layers of interpretation possible. These effects are explored in detail in chapter 6, where I focus on the way contributors to this thread negotiate discourses of gendered parenthood through play and collective alignment. In this section, however, I focus on one layer of meaning in posts to this thread, considering how Mumsnet users’ engagement in the faux promotion of their children for exchange or sale superimposes a commercial perspective on motherhood, women and their relation to children. This perspective can be seen to operate in the excerpts presented below, where contributors draw on the linguistic conventions of classified advertisements to ‘offer’ their children for exchange and describe their defining ‘features’. 
In posts 4 and 37, the child is introduced in an extended noun phrase. Participants’ use of the indefinite articles ‘a’ and ‘an’ de-emphasizes any relationship between author and child (where a personal pronoun such as ‘my’, for example, would emphasize this relationship). Their referential strategies, too, create 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’ (usually conventionalized in the acronyms DD and DS) would. Positive and evaluative adjectives such as ‘lovely’ and ‘extremely useful’ are more personal, but their intensifying function also emphasizes the competitive element of these posts, which is prominent in most promotional genres (Bhatia, 2005). In posts 1 and 73, participants again distance themselves from the children they describe, this time by listing their attributes, and through elision of the subject, which work to position children in terms of their valuable assets, rather than through, for example, their names or their relation to the author.

The linguistic conventions of classified advertisements that are present in the above excerpts work, on one level, to commodify children, positioning them as objects for sale. The way children are objectified and competitively pitted against one another in these descriptions also captures the business element of this mock exchange; the framing of the thread as a sales opportunity, with contributors showing off their children’s talents (as well as lamenting their flaws) under the guise of promoting their children as products. The keying of the classified advertisement frame in this thread may be playful, but in light of claims that consumerist values are increasingly shaping contemporary mothering practices (see chapter 2), these interactions can also be read as an engagement with a discourse of ‘commercialized motherhood’. This discourse positions mothers as the ‘producers’ of children as commodities and children as the ‘products’ of this endeavour. In particular, contributors can be said to play with the concept of the ‘good’ mother, who (as explained in chapter 2) is constituted as both entirely responsible for the outcomes of her children’s lives (here, their ‘value’ as ‘products’), and uses all resources at her disposal to maximize these outcomes. In this way, a close interplay between the discourses of ‘commercialized’ and ‘child-centric’ motherhood can be identified in this thread, an intersection that will be further explored in the sections that follow. Contributors’ allusion to the expectations of ‘good mothers’ through humorous play gives their posts a subversive edge that allows them to be read as a critique of such expectations; this layer of meaning will be further explored in chapter 6.

Classed motherhood
The final discourse of gendered parenthood that is presented here, ‘classed motherhood’, works to position women in both classed and gendered parental subject positions, for example, as ‘middle class’, ‘working class’, or ‘upper class’ mothers. This discourse is identified through an examination of resources that are indirectly indexical of class in contributions to the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread. As explained at the start of chapter 5, indirect indices are resources that have come to be associated with a particular group or identity (Ochs, 1992). Participants’ use of ‘affectively oriented’ resources in descriptions of their children, for example, can index cultural stereotypes around femininity and motherhood. In this section, I show that contributors to ‘Can we
have a child exchange? also frequently draw on linguistic and cultural resources that can be said to index socio-cultural expectations, assumptions and stereotypes around ‘middle class’ identities in descriptions of their children.

Several decades of sociological research, mostly conducted in a British context, have demonstrated strong links between access to particular socio-cultural resources and belonging to classed categories (e.g. Abercrombie and Warde, 2003; Bourdieu, 1984; Giddens, 1981; Goldthorpe, 1980; Parkin, 1982; Savage, Cunningham, Devine, Friedman, Laurison, McKenzie, Miles, Snee and Wakeling, 2015). Table 5.3 summarizes some of these enduring findings and assumptions about class, and what constitutes membership of a particular class. It presents class distinctions on a sliding scale, from what have been called the ‘lower’ or ‘working’ class, to the ‘middle classes’, and the ‘upper’ class. These categories emerged during the period of the industrial revolution and have endured to this day, despite numerous attempts (e.g. Goldthorpe, 1980; Savage et al., 2015) to develop and expand them. This table shows that access to resources such as wealth, educational opportunity and ‘highbrow’ cultural activities have tended to be firmly linked with a (predominantly British) ‘middle class’ identity. These resources can be conceptualized as indices because they are likely to be salient in terms of everyday assumptions and stereotypes about what it means to belong to a particular classed category. As noted in relation to ‘gendered parenthood’, however, it remains problematic to draw conclusions about the way individuals are orienting towards particular identities on the basis of such variables.

Table 5.3. Social indices of class, based on sociological research

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

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Education</strong></th>
<th>Compulsory, state education only, few qualifications</th>
<th>University and possibly private school education, numerous qualifications</th>
<th>Likely educated at prestigious and/or private institutions such as Eton, Cambridge (Abercrombie and Warde, 2003), numerous qualifications</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cultural interests</strong></td>
<td>Restricted engagement with leisure and cultural activities that are socially and institutionally approved and legitimized, or ‘highbrow’ (Bourdieu, 1984; Savage et al., 2015).</td>
<td>Engagement with a wide range of leisure and cultural activities, sometimes ‘highbrow’</td>
<td>Engagement with a wide range of leisure and cultural activities, often ‘highbrow’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Networks</strong></td>
<td>Restricted social networks; mainly familial ties</td>
<td>More diverse social networks; friendship, business and educational ties</td>
<td>Strong, mutually beneficial networks, based on familial, business, friendship and acquaintance ties: often called the ‘old boy network’ (Abercrombie and Warde, 2003)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As noted in chapter 2, the social construction of motherhood has long been linked with notions of class and classed categories, 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’. The fact that Mumsnet, the most popular and successful parenting website in the UK, is perceived as a site that is both dominated by middle class users, and works to reinforce ties between middle class values and ‘good’ mothering practices (Pedersen and Smithson 2010, 2013), adds weight to these claims. In the paragraphs that follow, I show how social expectations around class and classed identities can feed in to Mumsnet users’ interactions.

Throughout the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread, contributors draw on a number of linguistic and cultural resources that can be conceptualized as indices of a broadly, and typically British, ‘middle class’ identity. For example, in post 66 to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ (extract 5.6), PrincessLizzie uses formal, sophisticated linguistic resources with an apparent ease that suggests she has inherited a particular combination of institutionally legitimized cultural and educational capital whereby, from a young age, the resources available to her at home would have been supported and reinforced in an educational context, and vice versa (Bourdieu, 1984). It is important to note, however, that the playful and humorous tone of the thread continues in this post, again creating multiple possible layers of meaning that both go beyond and potentially subvert such assumptions around class. These meanings will be further explored in chapter 6.
1. I offer five-year-old Lego addicts. Their days are spent accidentally breaking apart fiendishly complex Lego constructions and waiting for help in reconstruction, as their ability to see what to do and understand lego instructions is greater than their ability to accomplish it, due to lack of coordination. Can be relied on for a copious supply of riotous giggling over nothing.

The complex sentence that comes between lines 1 and 4 exemplifies the kind of grammatical structures that are used in this thread. This construction can be divided into multiple clauses that are both paratactic and hypotactic, several of which also have very complex internal structures, such as ‘accidentally breaking apart fiendishly complex Lego constructions’ (lines 1-2), which ends with the heavily pre-modified noun phrase ‘fiendishly complex Lego constructions’. This post also includes formal and sophisticated lexical items such as ‘fiendishly’ (line 1), ‘reconstruction’ (line 2), ‘copious’ and ‘riotous’ (line 4). Similar words can be found across the thread, as shown in the following excerpts (see bold highlights):

Post 49. Janez. [H]e would... be as happy as a pig in the proverbial shit 😁
Post 50. BertieBotts. have v hilarious delusions...
Post 73. InanimateCarbonRod. Will swap for squish (sic) new born due to rampant broodiness

In many cases, words like these are positioned alongside linguistic and typographical resources that are rather more everyday and informal, such as ‘shit’ (post 49), ‘squish[y]’ (post 73), emoticons (post 49), strikethrough text (post 50) and abbreviations such as ‘v’ for ‘very’ (post 50). Such juxtapositions display contributors’ ability to draw on a diverse range of resources in the negotiation of a style that is extremely well matched to the context of this specific Mumsnet Talk thread. In other words, the resources they use can be seen to index a particular background at times, but they also satisfy a number of other functions: to create a humorous exchange, to share stories about their children and to echo a shared style within this forum (the nature and importance of this shared style will be further detailed in chapter 6). That participants’ posts can capture this range of functions is, in itself, quite a striking demonstration of the extensive communicative resources they have at their disposal and the sophisticated ways in which they are able to deploy these resources.

Many contributors to the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread also draw on economic and cultural resources in descriptions of their children. For example, in the excerpts below, participants emphasize their children’s various skills, talents, academic successes and intelligence (see bold highlights).

Extract 5.7. Excerpts from ‘Can we have a child exchange?’: posts 52, 55 and 87

52. Clobbered Wed 16-Jul-14 20:49:07
1. Model 1: Twenty-one, driver, non-smoker, recent graduate. Self-caring but tendency to wake early and pace the floor.
3. Model 2: Twenty, excellent cook and percussionist. Extreme clothing abuse (floordrobe currently occupying 2 rooms of the house)...

55. 2kidsintow Wed 16-Jul-14 21:16:47
1. I have on offer one 13 yo DD [13 year old darling daughter]. 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.
4. At most other times she is to be found sitting with pen in hand, or typing away on her
5. novel...

87. Timeisawastin Thu 17-Jul-14 00:36:29
1. I have on offer one 15yr old teenage girl. She's lovely, she's bright, chatty and well-behaved.
2. 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 and opportunities. Going to university and learning to play an instrument, for example, are both likely to involve significant financial investments. The fact that these participants refer to their children’s interests in 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) like writing a novel or classical singing are deployed with what Savage et al. (2015: 98) call a ‘cultural confidence’ that is 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.

Overall, a discourse of ‘classed motherhood’ can be seen to constitute motherhood as not only a gendered and commercialized, but also a *classed* endeavour in the ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ thread. This discourse intersects with the other discourses that have been introduced so far to the extent that it is difficult, at times, to disentangle them from one another. What emerges instead is a construction of motherhood that takes in all of these elements. This interdiscursivity, and the effects it creates, is further explored in the section that follows.

**Intersecting discourses of gendered parenthood: constituting the ‘good mother’**

There are key moments in the Mumsnet Talk threads at which the discourses of gendered parenthood that have been introduced above can be seen to intersect. In this section, I present some of these moments, showing how several discourses of gendered parenthood can merge to produce the ‘good mother’ subject position in both ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ and ‘Your identity as a mother’.

A number of the discourses that have been identified so far in this chapter are at play in MicrobatSister’s post to ‘Can we have a child exchange?’, which is reproduced in extract 5.8.

**Extract 5.8. Post 51 from ‘Can we have a child exchange?’**

MicrobatSister Wed 16-Jul-14 20:34:37
1. I have on offer an 8.5 yr [year] old DS [darling son], who is lovely and kindhearted, but can 2. talk about Minecraft for at least an hour before pausing for breath. He also wishes to become a 3. virologist when he grows up, and has (in his mind, anyway) recently invented a cure for the 4. common cold, which he also natters endlessly on and on and on about. He is trying to rope me 5. in to getting him a market stall (a precursor to him having a chain of stores - or is it better to 6. just 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 [second darling son] - who is 2 next week. Looks utterly angelic – 10. blonde, big blue eyes, very cuddly. But again, voice like a FOGHORN, like a duracell bunny, 11. just starting 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 rooms a lot. Don’t care if they can make tea or not as long as they sleep lots! 😁

In this post, MicrobatSister can be said to position herself within a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’, as a female parent, by drawing on resources that are indexical of femininity in the descriptions of her children. These include the intensifying adverbs ‘utterly’ (line 9) and ‘very’ (lines 7 and 10) and the affective adjectives ‘lovely’ (line 1), ‘angelic’ (line 9) and ‘cuddly’ (line 10). MicrobatSister 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 point to a discourse of ‘classed motherhood’. For example, she emphasizes 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, whilst positioning herself as someone who has access to a range of cultural and economic resources to support this path. Her formal and sometimes technical lexical choices such as ‘virologist’ (line 3) and ‘wishes to become...’ (line 2), which might have been phrased more simply as ‘wants to study viruses’, display an assured grasp of specialist and formal vocabulary that would be highly valued in educational and professional spheres. MicrobatSister’s lengthy descriptions also commodify her children, labelling them for offer in terms of their desirable qualities, skills and virtues and thus positioning them within a discourse of ‘commercialized motherhood’, as ‘products’ of her parenting. Further, she draws on the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse through her consistent focus on her children and through positive evaluations such as ‘lovely and kindhearted’ (line 1) and ‘utterly angelic’ (line 9). Like MrsKoala and nordibird, whose posts are analyzed in detail in relation to the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse, above, MicrobatSister positions herself as a passive participant in relation to her child (her ‘8.5 yr old DS’ in particular), and shows a willingness to put up with extreme boredom in order to meet his needs to ‘talk about Minecraft for at least an hour’ (line 2) or ‘natt[e] endlessly on and on and on’ (line 4).

When the discourses of ‘gendered parenthood’, ‘classed motherhood’, ‘commercialized motherhood’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ merge in this post, they work to position MicrobatSister as a gendered, classed subject who is entirely responsible for her children as ‘products’ and is positioned and evaluated in relation to these children. In other words, she is positioned, in line with persistent ideals and expectations in a contemporary western context, as a ‘good mother’. This is not a position that contributors take up in any straightforward way; as noted above, the play and humour at the heart of ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ works to complicate this positioning and create an underlying tone of critique that will be further explored in chapter 6.

There are two posts to ‘Your identity as a mother’ in which contributors make direct reference to the subject position of the ‘good mother’. One of these posts, written by MrsPennyapple (extract 5.9), draws together several discourses of gendered parenthood.

**Extract 5.9. Post 66 from ‘Your identity as a mother’**

**MrsPennyapple** Wed 04-Jun-14 12:04:45

...  

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 [darling husband] about it but he just doesn't get it. Last night he responded with
6. "but you're 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.

When MrsPennyapple’s husband invokes the ‘good mum’ category (line 6), which evaluates women in relation to their successful adoption of the subject position ‘mum’, he positions her within a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’. By differentiating the parental roles of herself and her husband according to gender, MrsPennyapple also draws on the overarching discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’. 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 have the same personal and/or emotional investment in their children’s lives. This opposition also works to position MrsPennyapple within the ‘mother as main parent’ discourse, as the parent who undertakes primary responsibility for their children. The convergence of these three discourses, ‘child-centric motherhood’, ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘gendered parenthood’, works to very powerfully position MrsPennyapple as a ‘good mother’; as a primary carer who is completely devoted to and positioned in relation to her children.

The discussion of these examples in which several discourses of gendered parenthood merge to position Mumsnet users as ‘good mothers’ affirms claims across a range of sociological literature that the concept of ‘good’ mothering continues to be culturally tied to middle class values, child-centricity and essentialist notions of women’s ‘natural’ predisposition towards caring, nurturing roles. This is despite claims that digital media, including forums such as Mumsnet Talk, can empower users to express themselves in multiple ways, and move beyond socio-cultural expectations and constraints (see chapter 3). This analysis and discussion also shows, importantly, that discourses of gendered parenthood often draw in and merge with other discourses, constituting specific ways in which women, as ‘mothers’, can be positioned in relation to children, in exclusively caring subject positions. Through such interdiscursivity, discourses of gendered parenthood ultimately become more powerful, because it becomes increasingly difficult to untangle the web of intersecting discourses that merge to produce subject positions such as the ‘good mother’. In the digital context of Mumsnet Talk, contributors are able to engage with and negotiate these discourses, but they do not seem able to completely escape them.

Resisting gendered parenthood

The discourses that have been outlined in this chapter so far are all gendered. The remaining discourses identified through analysis of Mumsnet Talk: ‘equal parenting’ and ‘individuality’, are arguably not gendered. In this section, I introduce these discourses and show that they are often positioned in competition with discourses of gendered parenthood, offering non-gendered subject positions such as ‘parent’ or ‘me’ in opposition with gendered subject positions such as ‘mother’. ‘Equal parenting’ and ‘individuality’ therefore offer sites for the resistance and negotiation of gendered parenthood in the Mumsnet Talk threads, especially ‘Your identity as a mother’. I also show, however, that the way contributors draw on discourses of gendered parenthood in the constitution of these oppositional discourses serves to amplify the profoundly gendered construction of parenthood in Mumsnet Talk interactions.
Equal parenting

A discourse of ‘equal parenting’ can be seen to operate in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread at moments where participants make a second parent relevant to the interaction and position both themselves and this second parent in a way that suggests they have equal parental roles. This discourse is able to offer equal parental subject positions, regardless of gender, and therefore compete with the ‘mother as main parent’, ‘absent fathers’, and ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourses.

The competing relation between ‘equal parenting’ and ‘mother as main parent’/‘absent fathers’ can be identified through close scrutiny of the positioning of men within the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. In the analysis presented in the previous section, I showed how the first person pronouns that dominate this thread mark the absence of fathers, excluding men from parental subjectivities and positioning women as the main carers for their children. I also showed how contributors such as MorningTimes position themselves and their husbands as oppositional subjects. Within the discourse of ‘equal parenting’, however, both parents tend to be made relevant to the discussion, and positioned as part of an equal unit who act jointly. For example, in post 11 (extract 5.10), EggNChips uses inclusive pronouns such as ‘we’, ‘us’ and ‘our’ to present herself and her ‘DP’ (darling partner) as a unit with equal parental roles. This simple difference in pronoun choice brings EggNChips’ partner in to the family sphere and positions them both on a more equal footing (the potentially transformative function of shifts like this is noted at the start of chapter 2).

Extract 5.10. Post 11 from ‘Your identity as a mother’

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

1. I was ready to become a mum when I had my DS [darling son], it was well worth waiting for –
2. we’d mellowed as a couple and both completed our post grad courses / worked up to a good
3. 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 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 [darling partner] does equal amounts of parenting and
8. between us we allow each other to do our own things (so I play for a sports team, do stuff (sic)
9. the NCT [National Childbirth Trust], and regularly organise a meal out with my girlfriends; he’s
10. training for a 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 only
12. 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, and my
14. sports and there is so much more to me than being a parent.

EggNChips’ use of the preposition ‘between [us]’ in this post (line 8) also positions herself and her partner in close relation to one another. She also uses lexically and syntactically similar sentences to list the ‘things’ that they allow each other to do, in the clauses ‘I play for a sports team’ (line 8)/ ‘he’s training for a sport thing’ (lines 9-10), and ‘[I] regularly organise a meal out with my girlfriends’ (line 9)/ ‘[He] meets his friend’ (line 10). These twinned constructions imply that both parents take part in an equal range of activities outside of the home, and that their interests are very similar, therefore again positioning them as parents who share their time at home with their children. This analysis makes it apparent that a discourse of ‘equal parenting’ can intersect with a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ in Mumsnet Talk interactions: male and female parents can take up different subject
positions, as ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’, yet it is possible to construct (or at least attempt to construct) these subject positions as equal.

Despite the implication of parental equality in EggNChips’ post, however, she can still be seen to take up the ‘mother as main parent’ discourse here. For example, in the statement ‘DP [darling partner] does equal amounts of parenting’ (line 7), EggNChips subtly positions herself as the parent with primary responsibility, whose contribution is automatically assumed, and the standard by which her partner’s parenting contribution is compared. In addition, she positions herself within a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’, as a ‘mum’, in the first line of each paragraph of her post. Her use of the qualifier ‘100%’ in line 4, further, positions her as a ‘child-centric’ mother, who is positioned exclusively in relation to her child. In line 7, the pre-clause qualifier ‘of course’ implies that her position as ‘mum’ in the home environment has ‘common sense’ status. 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 EggNChips repeatedly positions herself in a gendered parental role, then, her positioning of her DP is in many ways not equal; as in MorningTimes’ post, which is analyzed above in relation to the ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘absent fathers’ discourses, this male subject is described, instead, in relation to the things he does. Whilst the ‘equal parenting’ discourse offers the potential for equality between parents, this interaction therefore shows that the inequality of ‘common sense’ ideas about mothers and fathers makes it difficult to enact or express this equality in practice.

As well as offering ‘equal’ subject positions for mothers and fathers, the ‘equal parenting’ discourse can also offer a gender-neutral subject position, ‘parent’, which can compete with the gendered subject positions of ‘mother’ and ‘father’. Whilst the categories ‘mother’ and ‘father’ relate to distinct gendered subject positions, ‘parent’ offers the same subject position, regardless of gender. NotCitrus takes up this gender-neutral subject position in post 13 of ‘Your identity as a mother’, which is reproduced in extract 5.11 (see bold highlights).

Extract 5.11. Post 13 from ‘Your identity as a mother’

NotCitrus Sun 01-Jun-14 19:26:59
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 [second darling child], even though
4. since then 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.

NotCitrus’ use of the ‘parent’ category is unusual within the thread as a whole and therefore constitutes a marked choice, especially in her opening statement ‘parent is a strong part of my identity’. This direct response to the question posed at the start of the thread, ‘how much of your identity is bound up with being a mum?’, rejects the ‘mum’ category that pandarific offers. NotCitrus is also the only user of the ‘parent’ category who explicitly justifies this choice (implying that it’s quite a deliberate one), which she does with reference to gender between lines 6 and 7. Here, she
implies that the gendering of parental subjectivity is unnecessary, or irrelevant to her, and therefore both highlights and contests the common sense legitimacy of ‘gendered parenthood’. She also suggests that the subject position ‘parent’ is mutually exclusive to the subject position ‘mum’ when she compares them in line 5.

Despite the fact that she takes up the gender-neutral subject position ‘parent’, however, both the overarching discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ and the more specific discourses of ‘child-centric motherhood’ and ‘mother as main parent’ underpin NotCitrus’ words. For example, her use of singular pronouns to position herself in relation to her children throughout this post, including ‘my’ and ‘I’, works to create the impression that she is the only parent involved in her children’s lives (it is not clear whether this is the case from the content of her post, and as noted in chapter 3, I did not have access to additional information that might clarify this point). Her reference to ‘breastfeeding’ (line 4) and ‘smelling of my insides’ (lines 6-7) further draws attention to the aspects of parenthood that are biologically gender-specific, as in cakesonatrain’s post (see above). The ‘absent fathers’ and ‘mother as main parent’ discourses merge in this context, working to position NotCitrus as the ‘main’, or ‘default’, parent, and excluding male (or any other) carers from this subject position.

Further, the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse is evident in her statement ‘since then the children have had to occupy most of my energy’ (line 4), which implies that she is consumed by her parental role, giving most of herself to her children. NotCitrus also 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), emphasising 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 NotCitrus as a mum who is child-centred and has primary responsibility for her children, despite her avoidance of the gendered subject position ‘mum’ itself. This demonstrates, again, that gendered parental roles are difficult for Mumsnet users to escape, underpinning even constructions of parenthood that can seem, on the surface, to be gender-neutral.

Individuality

‘Individuality’ is the second discourse that competes with discourses of gendered parenthood in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. The following excerpts show that, just as the discourses of ‘gendered parenthood’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ are realized most persistently through participants’ self-identification as ‘mums’ in ‘Your identity as a mother’, a discourse of ‘individuality’ is repeatedly made apparent through double reference to self within variants of the clause ‘I am me’, where a first-person pronoun takes both the grammatical subject and complement positions. These claims are made particularly emphatically in posts 14 and 44, where the clause stands as a complete sentence, and in post 72, where the participant uses the intensifier ‘totally’ to make her claim that she is ‘completely’ herself explicit, in the same way that the author of post 11 claimed that she was ‘100% mum’ (see analysis of ‘child-centric motherhood’, above).

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

Because a discourse of ‘individuality’ positions subjects as individuals, not as members of a generic category, it can be taken up as a way of actively opposing being positioned as a particular ‘type’ of person. In ‘Your identity as a mother’, it tends to be taken up as a way of resisting being positioned
as a ‘mother’, especially a ‘child-centric mother’. Such opposition between ‘individuality’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ is particularly apparent in posts such as Crazym’s (extract 5.12), where contributors take up a position as an individual as part of their resistance to being categorized as a mum.

Extract 5.12. Post 13 to ‘Your identity as a mother’ (sic throughout)

Crazym Sun 01-Jun-14 19:07:32
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 just a part of who I am, not the whole.
3. Used to hate the silly bint at nursery who, when I went to collect the Dcs [darling children]
5. would say " and how are you today, mum?"
6. I have a name!!!! I am a person!!

In this post, Crazym resists being subject positioned exclusively as ‘mum’ in favour of a more individualistic subject position; the ‘I’ introduced in line 2. The opening and closing statements of her post capture her emphatic resistance by presenting the subject positions ‘mum’ and ‘I’ as oppositional: ‘Hate being identified as “mum”… I am a person!!’. Her use of six exclamation marks in two unmitigated four-word sentences in line 6, furthermore, suggest that she is fighting to express her individuality; that she actively opposes being positioned as a ‘mum’, at least by others who are not her children. It is worth pointing out that Crazym does actually position herself as a ‘mum’ in this post through the relational processes ‘became a mum…/ being a mum’ in line 2. This shows, as with the above analysis of ‘child-centric motherhood’, that a discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ can intersect with other discourses: Crazym is able to position herself as both a mum and an individual. Her statement ‘a part of who I am, not the whole’ (line 3) clarifies Crazym’s partial identification with the subject position ‘mum’. The ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse, however, works to position subjects as mothers to the exclusion of all other subject positions. It seems to be this position as a ‘total’, ‘child-centric’ mother that Crazym works to resist. As shown above, she does so by presenting the subject positions ‘mum’ and ‘I’ as oppositional, and through emphatic emphasis of her self-positioning as the latter; as an ‘individual’. She also evaluates being identified as a ‘mum’ in negative terms, both through the opening evaluation ‘hate’ and her negative evaluation of the nursery worker who calls her ‘mum’ as a ‘silly bint’ (line 4), a highly derogatory term that points to Crazym’s anger and frustration; channelled, at this moment, in the direction of this woman5.

The opposition between ‘individuality’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ is also evident at several other moments in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. For example, in the post by MrsPennyapple that was explored above (extract 5.9), converging discourses of gendered parenthood work to position MrsPennyapple as a ‘good mother’, who is completely devoted to her children. However, the closing statement of MrsPennyapple’s post, ‘I am the least important person in my own life’, crystallizes the tone of resentment and frustration that pervades her post. Here, MrsPennyapple positions herself as an individual through her use of the personal pronoun ‘I’ and the double possessive ‘my own life’. This double emphasis on self draws attention to the paradox of her final statement, which implies that this self is suppressed; made irrelevant by her positioning as a good, 5 It is interesting that Crazym uses the derogatory gendered term ‘bint’ to position this female nursery worker, considering her own rejection of this person’s use of the gendered ‘mum’ (which does not have the same explicitly negative connotations). When I contacted her to ask for consent, Crazym expressed regret at using the word ‘bint’, suggesting that she was aware of the potential irony in her choice of words.
‘child-centric’ 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 highlighting her inability to position herself as such, MrsPennyapple draws on a discourse of ‘individuality’ in order to convey her disapproval and dissatisfaction with being positioned as a ‘child-centric mother’, just as Crazym does in post 13 (further examples of the interplay between ‘individuality’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ are offered in Mackenzie, 2018). My analysis of both posts again points to the pervasiveness of discourses of gendered parenthood, which have the binary gendered categories of mother and father at their core, as well as emphasizing the difficulty Mumsnet users have in escaping these discourses.

Concluding remarks
This chapter has shown that discourses of gendered parenthood are dominant and pervasive in the Mumsnet Talk threads that are analyzed here, persistently working to position Mumsnet users in restrictive gendered subject positions. It has drawn attention to some of the ways in which these discourses are reproduced through linguistic forms such as categories, pronouns and evaluations, captured in statements such as ‘you’re a good mum’. I have also shown that contributors may take up the subject positions that are offered by these discourses more indirectly, for example through indexical resources.

This chapter is significant both for social scientists interested in gender, parenthood and identity, and for discourse studies scholars, because it names eight specific discourses that are taken up by Mumsnet users, which can be further explored in a range of contexts. I have suggested that the overarching discourse of ‘gendered parenthood’ binds together all of these discourses, inscribing a dichotomous gender divide between male and female parents that allows further, more specific and restrictive discourses to arise. The implications of these findings go beyond the academic context. As long as discourses of gendered parenthood continue to represent ‘common sense’ meanings around 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. Further, it is likely to be difficult for families who fall outside of the binary parental unit of mother and father, such as single, same-sex, non-binary or kinship carers and parents, to be valued and legitimized in a wider social context.

However, this chapter has also shown that contributors to ‘Your identity as a mother’ and ‘Can we have a child exchange?’ take up discourses that do not rely on gender differentiation, and that some of these discourses, namely ‘equal parenting’ and ‘individuality’, often compete with discourses of gendered parenthood such as ‘mother as main parent’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’. Furthermore, contributors to these threads can be seen to resist and negotiate discourses of gendered parenthood in varied and multiple ways. The next chapter will explore some of the ways in which these negotiations are played out in Mumsnet Talk. This focus will reveal further insights for research in the areas of both discourse studies, and gender and parenthood, across the social sciences. It will be particularly relevant for digital discourse studies, because it will show how digital, discursive and social frameworks intersect in Mumsnet Talk interactions.