Analysing gendered discourses online:  
Child-centric motherhood and individuality in Mumsnet Talk

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a methodological contribution to the study of language, gender and sexuality in digital contexts. It draws attention to the problematic task of identifying and analysing discourses in studies that focus on the discursive construction of gendered identities, and offers an approach to such investigations that is firmly rooted in feminist poststructuralist discourse theory (Baxter, 2003; Weedon, 1997). Drawing on my own study of Mumsnet Talk, an online discussion forum that targets female parents, I show how I have drawn feminist poststructuralist theory together with positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990) to closely analyse the way Mumsnet users position themselves in relation to others, and in relation to wider social forces, through their digital interactions. I promote clear explication of the means by which discourses are identified and close attention to the role language plays in discursive struggles. I suggest that the approach taken in this study is particularly effective and appropriate for the identification and analysis of discourses in busy, relatively unregulated digital contexts, which provide a space for multiple voices and perspectives to be heard.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I aim to show that the concept of gendered discourses continues to be highly relevant for the study of language, gender and sexuality and to illustrate some of the processes by which these discourses can be identified and analysed. Drawing on my own study of Mumsnet Talk, an online discussion forum that targets female parents, I will show
how I have brought feminist poststructuralist theory (Baxter 2003; Weedon 1997) together with positioning theory (Davies and Harré 1990) in order to understand and analyse Mumsnet users’ online interactions in relation to wider social forces, and to consider what options are available to them: as individuals, as women, as parents and as mothers. I suggest that this approach is particularly relevant in busy, relatively unregulated digital contexts, which provide spaces for multiple voices to be heard.

Discourses, in the Foucauldian sense of ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972:42), have been a focal point for a great deal of research in the field of language, gender and sexuality, particularly in the first decade of the 21st century. Much of this work has focused on ‘gendered discourses’ (Sunderland 2004), also known as discourses of ‘gender differentiation’ (Baxter 2003) or ‘gender difference’ (Baker 2008). This collective name takes in a range of overlapping and inter-related discourses that work to position ‘men’ and ‘women’ in distinct and binary subject positions, or ‘ways of being an individual’ (Weedon 1997: 3). A focus on gendered discourses offers a way of conceptualising and drawing attention to the profoundly gendered nature of our social world, and naming specific ways in which individuals are positioned as gendered subjects. For example, Sunderland (2000, 2004) has identified the complementary discourses ‘Father as mother’s bumbling assistant’ and ‘mother as manager of the father’s role in childcare’ in parentcraft texts. Coupland and Williams’ (2002) exploration of a range of media texts includes analysis of three discourses of the menopause: the ‘pharmaceutical’, ‘alternative therapy’ and ‘emancipatory feminist’ discourses. In Baker’s (2014) corpus study of news articles from The Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday, he identifies discourses of homosexuality such as ‘gay people are effeminate’ and ‘being gay is a secret shame’. The work of these authors suggests that discriminatory practices, such as excluding fathers from the role of main parent, valuing women exclusively for their youth, beauty and fertility, and restricting the
rights of same-sex couples, are enabled through restrictive discourses of both gender and sexuality.

Identifying and analysing discourses, however, is not a straightforward process. This is perhaps because of a lack of clarity around the term ‘discourse(s)’ itself, which can sometimes be used in a rather vague and uncritical way, as I will show in this chapter. Identifying discourses is also a subjective process (Reisigl and Wodak 2009; Sunderland 2004), leaving attempts to name and analyse them vulnerable to criticism about the reliability of the findings. Further, the interconnected, shifting and unstable nature of discourses makes them difficult to identify and delimit (Baxter 2003; Reisigl and Wodak 2009). Finally, language, gender and sexuality researchers may be reluctant to name specific discourses because to do so may give the impression that certain forms of knowledge are fixed, and therefore make them even more difficult to challenge. This point echoes some of the criticisms levelled at much early language and gender research that focused on the differences between language used by and about men and (especially) women, by scholars such as Bing and Bergvall (1996), Cameron (1996) and Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992). However, in this chapter I will show that the identification and analysis of discourses from a feminist poststructuralist perspective remains extremely valuable because it can support an appreciation of multiple power relations and competing forms of knowledge, as well as the emergence of new and transformative meanings in relation to gender and sexuality. I will also show how such an approach can be realised in practice, with reference to my own research exploring constructions of motherhood in the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum.

**DISCOURSES AND FEMINIST POSTSTRUCTURALIST THEORY**
In this chapter, I approach the concept of discourses from a feminist poststructuralist perspective. Feminist poststructuralism, in brief, interrogates concepts of gender, sexuality and identity, facilitating the exploration of what it means to be, for example, a woman or a man, both or neither, feminine or masculine, straight, gay or bisexual (Mills and Mullany 2011; Weedon 1997). The theory is well positioned to examine the ways in which individuals are defined by gendered terms like these and the dominant forms of knowledge that constitute their meanings. Feminist poststructuralist theory has an explicitly political agenda, contributing to the disruption and continual redefinition of dominant norms, expectations and meanings, and the gradual erosion of grand narratives around gender and sexuality (Baxter 2003; Weedon 1997). Its focus on resistance, struggle, difference and diversity supports the emergence of new and transformative meanings that can contribute to a rich diversity of ‘ways of being an individual’ (Weedon 1997: 3). Feminist poststructuralism’s reluctance to settle on fixed, unitary forms of knowledge and subjectivity make it markedly different from ‘modernist’ (Baxter 2003) or ‘second wave’ (Mills and Mullany 2011) feminism, which tends to treat ‘men’ and ‘women’ as universal, stable groups (Baxter 2003).

The influence of Foucault (1972, 1978) brings to feminist poststructuralism an appreciation that, whilst social life is complex, heterogeneous and replete with possibilities, and whilst meaning is shifting and unstable, powerful forces still work to fix meaning; to construct the social world in specific ways. These forces can be conceptualised as discourses; regulated groups of statements that constitute knowledge, position subjects and inscribe power relations. In Foucault’s (1972, 1978) view, some discourses gain the status and currency of ‘truth’, coming to dominate how we define and organise both ourselves and our social world. In other words, certain discourses can become synonymous with popular conceptions of what is ‘everyday’ or ‘normal’, acquiring a ‘very special kind of obviousness’ (Althusser 1971: 139) that makes them difficult to escape. Discourses that have acquired such ‘common sense’
legitimacy can be described as dominant, and they often work to marginalise other discourses that are not institutionally legitimised or widely recognised as the ‘norm’. Our sense of who we are and what we know is thus regulated through discourses, especially dominant discourses that are entrenched in social structures and institutions such as hospitals, schools and prisons (Foucault 1967, 1972, 1977).

The relationship between knowledge, power and subjectivity within Foucauldian and poststructuralist theory raises questions about whether we have any control at all over our conception of our world and ourselves. The way this relationship is understood will depend, to a degree, upon the analyst’s interpretation of power. In this chapter, commensurate with the work of poststructuralist theorists who avoid defining power in terms of stark contrast or rule (Bakhtin 1981; Foucault 1978), I conceptualise the relationship between knowledge and subjectivity in terms of power relations that are plural and competing (see Baxter 2003).

From this perspective, some discourses may be identified as ‘dominant’ or ‘marginalised’ in a particular culture or context, but this does not mean they are universally dominant or marginalised, that the forms of knowledge and subjectivity they legitimise are fixed, or that they cannot be challenged. Such a relational view of power can allow language, gender and sexuality researchers to move away from binary, ‘top-down’ perspectives that position women as oppressed and constrained within a patriarchal system, and towards an approach that can emphasise silenced, suppressed and marginalised voices, allow for the possibility that discourses can be negotiated, contested or resisted, and thus give rise to new and transformative meanings, behaviours or ways of being an individual (Baxter 2003; Mills 2003). Some recent studies of language and gender that achieve these goals include Corwin’s (2017: 272) analysis of the speech of 15 genderqueer individuals, which focuses on how gender emerges in interaction. In this study, Corwin (2017: 273) shows how one of her participants makes flexible use of a range of embodied signs such as voice pitch and gestures
towards different parts of the body to both draw on indices of binary gender, but also to resist them, and thus to create ‘new gender expressions’. In a different context, Baxter’s (2018: 3) study of the way women leaders are portrayed in the UK press provides readers with a toolkit for deconstructing and challenging stereotyped and sexualised portrayals of these leaders, by reading news media ‘against the grain’.

Placing discourses at the heart of language, gender and sexuality research can enhance explorations of what might be called cultural ‘norms’ or ‘expectations’ around gender, sexuality and identity. By identifying and naming discourses, and deconstructing the ways in which they operate through language, analysts can specify the forces that may both enable and restrict different ways of understanding issues of gender and sexuality. As noted above, however, discourses are complex, unstable and shifting entities. This may explain why the ways in which they are defined and identified are so rarely made explicit in research across the social sciences. For example, sociologists exploring norms and expectations around gender and parenting - the theme of the Mumsnet study that will be detailed below - have named a range of discourses of parenthood such as ‘intensive mothering’ and ‘child-centredness’ (Wall 2013), ‘equality’ and ‘involved fatherhood’ (Miller 2011), without making the means by which they come to name these discourses explicit. Readers are consequently relying on the authors’, as well as their own, intuitions and assumptions in order to understand what it is that reveals the presence of these discourses, and indeed, why they are ‘discourses’ at all: they might just as usefully be called ‘themes’ or ‘ideas’. Analyses like these will often raise important issues, but they are unlikely to reveal very much about exactly how forms of knowledge about gender and parenthood are recognised in the first place, how they operate, compete, merge and combine and, importantly, how they can be negotiated and challenged.
To offer (or follow) a prescribed, definitive method for identifying discourses, however, would be counter to poststructuralist principles in many ways: the very nature of poststructuralist thought encourages the analyst to embrace multiple perspectives; to resist prescription and claims to ‘truth’ or ‘objectivity’ through ‘scientific’, ‘precise’ methodologies (Graham 2005: 3). However, several discourse analysts, especially critical discourse analysts, have offered some guidance by describing their methods for discourse identification and analysis in detail. For example, van Leeuwen (2009) focuses on a text’s representation of actors, actions, times and places, through markers such as lexical choice and verb type. Baxter (2010) examines lexical choices, turn taking and verb tense, whilst Reisigl and Wodak (2009: 94) locate what they call ‘discursive strategies’ such as nomination and predication, whereby people, objects, phenomena and processes are named and characterised, or intensification and mitigation, whereby the force of a statement is heightened or reduced (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009: 93-95). A range of factors inform the choices these scholars make about which linguistic features to explore or emphasise, including their own perspectives and the nature of both the context and the issues they investigate. For example, Baxter’s (2010) attention to turn taking practices is particularly appropriate for the analysis of spoken interaction. Fairclough’s (1992) focus on transitivity, theme and modality reveals his commitment to the systemic functional linguistic approach and its applicability to written discourse. What these analysts have in common, however, is their systematic evidencing of discourses through close scrutiny of language. This is based on the principle that, although we may not be able to ‘see’ an entire discourse on the page, what we can see are the linguistic practices through which discourses operate. It is through language, after all, that discursive struggles are acted out (Mills 2004), and so it is through an analysis of language that discourses can be reconstructed.
Sunderland’s (2000, 2004) inductive, ‘bottom-up’ approach to identifying and naming discourses has been particularly influential in the field of language, gender and sexuality. In her analysis of gendered discourses in parentcraft texts (leaflets and books about pregnancy and child care), Sunderland (2000, 2004) works to recognise and name discourses by identifying their linguistic ‘traces’. As she explains, discourses are not concrete entities, waiting to be ‘spotted’, and are never truly present in a text in their entirety. But linguists can pinpoint linguistic features which hint at the existence of a particular discourse, and treat those features as a starting point in the reconstruction of that discourse. For example, through her scrutiny of the way the recurring linguistic items ‘play’, ‘fun’, ‘help’ and ‘share’ are attributed to male and female parents, Sunderland (2000, 2004) uncovers some of the gendered discourses at work in parentcraft texts. So, she suggests, the ‘Part-time father/Mother as main parent’ discourse ‘is realised through the recurrence of help’, which is largely attributed to fathers, and the ‘Father as baby entertainer’ discourse ‘is realised through recurrences of play, fun and enjoy’, again attributed largely to male parents (Sunderland 2000: 265, her emphasis). In keeping with Foucauldian poststructuralist theory, Sunderland pays attention not only to what is present in the text, but also to what is absent. For example, the absence of the linguistic items ‘share’ and ‘paternity leave’, as well as the backgrounding of fathers through lack of specific reference to men as parental subjects, also points to the ‘Part-time father/Mother as main parent’ discourse. Sunderland (2000: 255) develops her exploration of the ways in which discourses operate and her identification of the discourses themselves concurrently, so that discourses are ‘both the object and the result’ of her analysis.

Despite the examples that have been offered above, there still appears to be relatively little methodological guidance on the identification and analysis of discourses in an otherwise extensive field of language, gender and sexuality studies. In this chapter, I aim to address this problem by outlining my own approach to identifying and analysing discourses of gender and
parenthood in Mumsnet Talk interactions. This approach is aligned with Sunderland’s (2000, 2004) in many respects, as well as sharing a similar research context and aims. For example, I take an inductive approach, which involves identifying discourses and analysing the mechanisms through which they operate concurrently. I also pay attention to both recurrent and absent linguistic features, taking the view that it is not just what is *said*, but what is *not said*, that can point to the presence of discourses. However, I take the discursive analysis of language, gender and parenthood to a new context, that of an online discussion forum for parents, in which there is more space for a diverse range of voices to be heard than in the relatively fixed content of parentcraft texts. The digital context of this forum also means that it is not only linguistic but visual and other typographical features that are of interest; accordingly, my approach is able to incorporate a range of semiotic forms. Finally, my commitment to feminist poststructuralist theory, especially the Foucauldian perspective, leads me to place more emphasis on the discursive nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity than Sunderland (2000: 261), who tends to treat discourses more as groups of ideas or values that recur in texts, and ‘ways of looking at the world’, than as powerful regulatory practices that work to govern their subjects’ minds and bodies.

**THE MUMSNET STUDY**

This section turns to my study of multi-party interactions within the Mumsnet Talk discussion forum, which aimed to explore how Mumsnet users negotiate discourses of gender and parenthood in this context (Mackenzie 2017, 2018a, 2018b). This study was conducted in two stages: ‘data construction’ and ‘identifying and analysing discourses’, which are detailed in full in Mackenzie (2018b). In this section, I focus on the main part of the second stage,
explicating the iterative process of exploratory linguistic analysis, discourse identification and discourse analysis that is shown in figure 1.

Figure 1. Research design for the Mumsnet study

The thematic coding and categorisation of 50 Mumsnet Talk threads in the first stage of this study, and focused coding of two selected threads in the second stage (see Mackenzie 2018b), led me to identify a number of potential discourses at play in these digital conversations. As the second stage of analysis developed, I further investigated the presence of these potential discourses in two Mumsnet Talk threads. This exploratory analysis focused, following Sunderland (2000, 2004), on identifying ‘traces’ of these discourses. As well as identifying linguistic traces, I also paid attention to digital aspects of Mumsnet Talk interactions, paying equal attention to the meanings produced through the use of non-linguistic features such as images, emojis and strikethrough text. This analysis was not bound by a pre-determined framework; I did not set out to investigate any specific linguistic and digital features, but to discover which features emerged as significant in relation to my aims.
In order to operationalise an analysis that was consistent with feminist poststructuralist theory, I drew on Davies and Harré’s (1990) positioning theory, which considers how individuals are positioned as subjects through social interaction. This conceptual framework facilitated a two-sided approach that focused not only on identifying traces of discourses, but also analysing the way these discourses operate through the discursive nexus of knowledge, power and subjectivity. From this perspective, I explored what meanings about gender and parenthood were taken up and legitimised at different moments, through an exploration of how contributors’ use of particular linguistic and digital resources worked to legitimise or challenge particular forms of knowledge and/or position them in particular ways. I also considered what power relations were inscribed by those forms of knowledge and subjectivity, including considerations of whether they were dominant or marginalised, empowering or restrictive. Some of the results of this analysis will be exemplified in the section that follows.

IDENTIFYING AND ANALYSING DISCOURSES OF ‘CHILD-CENTRIC MOTHERHOOD’ AND ‘INDIVIDUALITY’ IN MUMSNET TALK

This section details part of my analysis of a single thread posted to Mumsnet Talk in the summer of 2014: ‘Your identity as a mother’. In this thread, multiple relations between gender and parenthood are explored and negotiated as participants openly discuss their sense of self, particularly in relation to the category ‘mum’. The title and opening post of this thread (extract 1) sets out the agenda: to explore people’s experiences of motherhood, especially how motherhood changes them, and their view of themselves. In this section, I pinpoint some of the linguistic and digital traces that led me to identify the presence of two discourses in this thread: ‘child-centric motherhood’ and ‘individuality’. I also consider how these
linguistic and digital forms work as discursive resources that contributors draw on to position themselves in relation to these discourses.

Extract 1. Opening post to ‘Your identity as a mother’ (all extracts are reproduced as they appear in the original posts)

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

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

‘Child-centric motherhood’

The first linguistic trace of the ‘child-centric motherhood’ discourse in ‘Your identity as a mother’ is a construction that includes the category ‘mum’ (an extremely common category across the thread), qualified by an intensifier, as in the examples shown below.

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
In these examples, contributors’ use of the intensifiers ‘almost entirely’, ‘100%’, ‘almost wholly’ and ‘so intensely’ conveys a sense that it is difficult for them to be anything other than a ‘mum’; that their sense of self is intensely bound with the subject position ‘mum’.

Traces of a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’ can also be found in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread where participants express positive feelings for and commitment to their children. In the following examples, contributors employ a range of linguistic and visual resources that suggest their love and care for their children is obvious and certain; that their feelings are just ‘common sense’.

Post 18. *Kath6151* My priority is now 100% my DS [darling son] though

Post 21. *PoundingTheStreets.* I love my DC 😊 [darling children]

Post 34. *AssertiveDecorations.* I feel I barely identify as a parent at all even though I love the DC to death

Contributors again employ intensifiers in these posts; ‘100%’, the smiling emoji 😊, and ‘to death’. Rather than qualifying the nature of their position as ‘mums’ (or indeed ‘parents’), however, in these instances they are qualifying the nature of the love for their children (posts 21 and 34), and the extent to which their children are a ‘priority’ (post 18). Indeed, *AssertiveDecorations* rejects any self-identification as a parent, but balances this assertion with a hyperbolic statement of love for her children. These contributors also draw on a range of other resources to confirm their position as child-centric mothers. For example, *PoundingTheStreets’* monosyllabic sentence ‘I love my DC’ is positioned in a separate line at the end of her post, making her unmitigated declaration of love even more emphatic. The smiling emoji implies certainty that her statement of love will be well received by readers.

All of the above examples are taken from the final line of posts, adding to the force and
finality of these statements. These linguistic and digital resources suggest that mothers loving their children and putting them first is a form of knowledge that has common sense legitimacy in this context.

Close analysis of post 23 (extract 2) further evidences the presence and dominance of a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’ in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, and shows how one contributor positions herself in relation to this discourse.

Extract 2. Post 23 to 'Your identity as a mother'

QueenofLouisiana Sun 01-Jun-14 23:33:27

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

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

In this post, QueenofLouisiana (henceforth ‘Queen’) draws on a range of linguistic resources to position her son at the centre of her life, and thereby herself as a ‘child-centric mother’. Between lines 6 and 8, she makes it explicit that she puts his needs before her own, for example through her use of the verbal phrase ‘give up’ in line 6, which implies that she is not only passing time, but that this is a selfless act that results in loss of time for herself. Queen also suggests that she goes to extreme lengths in her commitment to her son, using the
My identification of a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’ in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread echoes the findings of previous studies of motherhood in Western contexts. Sociological studies by Hays (1996), Lawler (2000), Lowe (2016) and Wall (2013), for example, all point to pervasive expectations that being a mother, and especially a ‘good’ mother, is often conflated with being completely child-centred and self-sacrificing. My analysis of the ways in which this discourse is taken up and negotiated in ‘Your identity as a mother’ demonstrates how forms of knowledge that emphasise the imperative positioning of mothers in relation to children are mapped on to the subject position of the ‘child-centric mother’. The positioning of self exclusively in relation to children, however, is often challenged in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread through an assertion of a self that is
distinct from the subject position ‘mother’, and the needs of children. The following section turns to this site of opposition, in the form of a discourse of individuality.

‘Individuality’

Just as a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’ is realised partly through participants’ self-identification as child-centric mums, a discourse of ‘individuality’ is repeatedly taken up in ‘Your identity as a mother’ through participants’ self-identification as individuals. This is apparent in the following excerpts, where participants all employ a variant of the clause ‘I am me’, in which a personal pronoun takes both grammatical subject and object position.

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..

Through this double reference to self, participants make their claim to individuality. These claims are made particularly emphatic in posts 14, 44 and 72, where the clause stands as a complete sentence, and in post 72, where the participant uses the intensifier ‘totally’ to make explicit her statement that she is ‘completely’ herself.

Further microlinguistic analysis of whole posts suggests that ‘individuality’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ often compete in the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread. For example, in post 13 (extract 3), these discourses seem to be at the centre of Crazym’s struggle to define her own subjectivity.

Extract 3. Post 13 to 'Your identity as a mother'

16
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 would say "and how are you today, mum?"
4. I have a name!!!! I am a person!!

By opening her post with the negative evaluation ‘hate’, Crazym resists being subject positioned exclusively as a ‘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 ‘person’ as oppositional: ‘Hate being identified as “mum”… I am a person!!’ Her use of six exclamation marks in two declarative four-word sentences in line 6, furthermore, suggest that she is fighting to express her individuality, and that by positioning herself as an individual, she resists being positioned exclusively as a mum. Crazym’s rejection of being identified as a mum suggests that, for her, this subject position restricts her access to other ways of being – especially as an individual; a person in her own right. Despite Crazym’s emphatic resistance to ‘being identified as “mum”’, however, she positions herself in this way through the relational processes ‘became a mum…/ being a mum’ in line 2. She works to avoid positioning herself as a ‘child-centric mother’, however, in the statement ‘a part of who I am, not the whole’ (line 3), which reiterates her partial identification with this subject position.

The oppositionality between ‘individuality’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ is also evident in post 59 (extract 4).

Extract 4. Excerpt from post 59 to ‘Your identity as a mother'
1. Can you guess some have been a PITA [pain in the arse] already lecturing me (good mums
don't, apparently, wear make-up: that money/time could be spent on PFB [precious first
born]).

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

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

In this post, Viglioso draws on a discourse of ‘individuality’ as part of her resistance to a
discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’. The discourse of individuality is voiced here through
the ‘devoted mum’ she describes between lines 4 and 6. The self-possessive ‘own’ within the
label ‘her “own woman”’ (line 6) works to suggest that this individual is in control of her life;
that she is able to determine her own subjectivity and is not controlled by others. The way
Viglioso positions children in relation to the ‘devoted mum’ also points to a discourse of
‘individuality’. Where, in lines 1-3, the child (‘PFB’ – ‘precious first born’) is positioned in a
passive role, the child of line 6 is positioned as co-existing alongside the ‘devoted mum’,
through use of the prepositions ‘with’ and ‘by [her side]’. This positioning of adult and child
points to their co-existence as separate individuals, with neither being entirely reliant on the
other. Viglioso shows that she approves the ‘individuality’ discourse by aligning with this
‘devoted mum’, through positive evaluations such as ‘devoted’, ‘passionate adoration’, ‘care’
and ‘special input’. Viglioso also positions herself more explicitly as an individual through
her use of the personal pronoun ‘me’ in her closing statement ‘I would like to be *allowed* to be me 😊’ (line 9; her emphasis). As with PoundingTheStreets’ post (see above), Viglioso’s use of a smiling emoji at the end of her post seems to function as an emphatic full stop that gives a sense of finality to her statement of individuality. As noted by Gibson et al. (2018), the function of emojis is highly context-dependent and variable. Given Viglioso’s complex negotiation of ‘child-centric motherhood’ and ‘individuality’, in which she both relies upon, but also resists, the position of the ‘child-centric mother’, the placement of the smiling emoji at the end of her post could also be read as a resource for mitigating this final statement and encouraging others not to read it too seriously.

The above analysis shows how the discourses of ‘individuality’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ can compete in the context of the ‘Your identity as a mother’ thread, with contributors such as Crazym and Viglioso working to position themselves within a discourse of ‘individuality’ as part of their resistance of a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’. At such moments, the subject position ‘me’ can become powerful and transformative, offering Mumsnet users control over their sense of self and access to multiple possible ways of being an individual, as well as contributing to the gradual erosion of what seems to be a dominant discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’. It is partly *through* the analysis of these struggles to define forms of knowledge and subjectivity that ‘individuality’ and ‘child-centric motherhood’ are more confidently identified as discourses.

**DISCUSSION**

This chapter has shown that the study of language, gender and parenthood in a digital context can be enriched through a focus on identifying and analysing discourses from a feminist
poststructuralist perspective. I have shown both how discourses such as ‘child-centric motherhood’ and ‘individuality’ can be identified through examination of the linguistic and digital traces of these discourses, and how the forms of knowledge, power and subjectivity that operate through these discourses can be further analysed by drawing on Davies and Harré’s (1990) positioning theory. For example, my analysis reveals that a discourse of ‘child-centric motherhood’ can work to position Mumsnet users entirely in relation to their children, as devoted, loving parents, to the exclusion of other potential subject positions. On the other hand, I also show that many Mumsnet users work to resist this dominant discourse by drawing on a competing discourse of ‘individuality’ to position themselves as individuals, rather than members of a generic category of ‘mothers’.

The insights from this analysis reveal some of the demands, expectations and restrictions that are placed on parents, especially mothers, in contemporary British society. For example, the oppositional relations between ‘child-centric motherhood’ and ‘individuality’ point to the struggles and frustrations for some Mumsnet users at being unable to escape gendered subject positions such as the ‘child-centric mother’, and show that notions of child-centric love and devotion are intricately bound with their sense of what it means to be a mother. Such persistent expectations that mothers will be entirely child-centred will make it difficult for male parents to adopt child-centred roles within the family, and difficult for female parents to adopt valued and legitimised roles outside of their relation to children. However, this analysis has also pointed to the emergence of new and transformative meanings that can contribute to more richly diverse ways of being a parent.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS
Digital contexts such as the Mumsnet Talk forum can offer interesting and relevant sites for exploring, challenging and destabilising dominant discourses of gendered parenthood such as ‘child-centric motherhood’, providing unprecedented access to the perspectives of individuals in diverse family groups, as well as the discursive struggles and transformative practices in which they may be involved. The Mumsnet study has revealed some important insights in this area, but issues around language, gender and parenthood are equally likely to be relevant to groups who are not adequately represented within this forum, such as fathers, same-sex and/or working-class parents. Indeed, there is a pressing need to explore the experiences and struggles of these groups, who have often been marginalised both in academic research and in society more generally. I therefore suggest that constructions of parenthood in a wider range of contexts, and by different groups of parents, are an important area for future research in language, gender and sexuality, as they may be able to raise awareness of the many ways in which it is possible to be a parent, carer or family in a contemporary context.

Research that explores the particular methodological challenges of conducting discourse-theoretical work in digital contexts is unfortunately still relatively scarce in the field of language, gender and sexuality. In the sample analysis offered above, the function of digital resources (namely emojis) is considered as part of an analysis that focuses mainly on linguistic features. This is appropriate for analysing digital interactions that primarily rely on the written word. However, the analysis of language, gender and parenthood online may include the examination of media that are more reliant on other forms of expression, such as images or videos. Zappavigna and Zhao’s (2017) analysis of ‘mommyblogging’, for example, explores selfies posted to Instagram with the hashtags #motherhood and #momlife. Their article stops short of in-depth theorisation about what these selfies communicate about discourses of motherhood, and Instagram users’ self-positioning as ‘mothers’, but it does offer a new framework for categorising and analysing selfies as ‘metafunctional resources’
for presenting an individual’s perspective on the world. Future explorations of language, gender and parenthood online will benefit from this kind of research. By paying attention to these and other insights from the field of language and new media, analysts will be well placed to conduct comprehensive analyses of the ways in which parents draw on multimodal resources to navigate their own position in relation to wider discourses.

FURTHER READING


This edited collection offers a comprehensive overview of recent theoretical and methodological developments in discourse studies. Its introduction provides clear and concise definitions of key terms, concepts, and outlines the nature of the emerging discipline of discourse studies itself.


Contributions to this collection are united by a linguistic focus on identity constructions in social media contexts, including several contributions that explore the negotiation of gender roles online.

This article contributes to a currently marginalised but emerging area of research that explores alternative kinship structures from a sociolinguistic perspective.

**RELATED TOPICS**

digital ethnography, leadership language of Middle Eastern women, multi-semioticity and intersectionality in social media

**REFERENCES**


