Feminism & Psychology

Book Review

Jai Mackenzie, *Language, gender and parenthood online: Negotiating motherhood in Mumsnet talk*. Routledge, 2019; 123 pp. ISBN 978-1-138-50622-0

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I picked up this text with enthusiasm. The growth of social media alongside the study of contemporary parenting (and parenting cultures) is one that is gaining momentum but, despite this, and some recent texts including Sarah Pedersen's work on *Mumsnet* (2016) and Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum Ross's "Parenting for a Digital Future" (2020), scholarship in this field is still in its relative infancy with work spread across disciplinary boundaries. Mackenzie sets out to consider the ways in which motherhood, gender, and parenting are constructed online through language. Her focus is on *Mumsnet*, a popular parenting site originating in the United Kingdom, that contains information on parenting along with opportunities for parents to interact on discussion boards.

Mackenzie starts from a linguistic perspective, applying a feminist poststructural lens to the topic and adopting critical discursive methods for analysis. An initial point of interest for her is the social norms of parenting. She demonstrates how mothers are primary in our language use around parenting, while fathers are absent from the *Mumsnet* narratives of parenting identity in what she terms "collective erasure of men and fathers" (p. 6). This is an astute observation, but not altogether novel. This erasure has previously been highlighted as existing across time and context. For example, Sunderland (2000) observed how parenting literature commonly depicted fathers as "part-time", "baby entertainers" and "bumbling assistants". Similarly, Laura King (2015) noted this absence in her oral history of father involvement in the first half of 20th-century Britain in *Family Men*.

Mackenzie takes us through seven chapters to examine the ways in which motherhood is addressed in *Mumsnet* talk. She begins reflexively, setting the scene for this work and locating herself within the research topic. Mackenzie guides the reader through the development of her ideas, noting her reflexive approach. Her work developed through her early days of motherhood, beginning with the birth of her child and her initial forays into *Mumsnet*. She revisits her self-reflexive stance

in Chapter 4, where she describes herself as initially having been a "detached observer" and then an "observer-participant". The detailed consideration of her placement in this research and its role in the selection and interpretation of data is useful, given that much of the existing literature on intensive motherhood and parenting cultures operates from a non-disclosed middle-class perspective. Mackenzie gives specific examples of where her placement in this research process could have influenced her choice of posts. She notes that, on one occasion, she selected a post that she herself could easily have written.

Before setting out the analytic lens for her work, in Chapter 2, Mackenzie provides a detailed discussion of language, gender, and methodological approaches, deconstructing what we typically mean by discourses and challenging previous research on gender and parenting. In Chapter 3, she moves into a more detailed discussion of how parenting and gender have been constructed online. She considers the different ways that identity has been considered as performative in online settings. This moves to a discussion of new work that has focused less on the performative nature of online settings and more on the negotiation of gendered expectations of parenting in online settings. Many of these settings take the form of Internet discussion fora. Mackenzie argues that these provide a fruitful site for collecting data to explore the predominant parenting discourses. Online parenting fora are typically seen as safe and supportive spaces, where parents can talk freely about concerns around parenting; the strong degree of anonymity adds to this freedom. As such, members may be able to challenge commonplace norms of parenting ideologies, recognisable in the parenting discourses across Western industrialised and many "Global North" cultures. Mackenzie draws on several sources, including Sarah Pedersen's work on *Mumsnet Talk* (2016) that challenges and resists the "good mothering" mandate so persuasive in contemporary parenting discourse.

The focus of Mackenzie's own research is on the chat section, *Mumsnet Talk Forum*, where parents can discuss and post information, situating parents as both "producers" and "users" (p. 23) of discourse, sampling threads within "talk" topics. As such, many of the threads in her analysis focus on asynchronous postings and Mackenzie examines the various language forms and practices used in digital contexts and relevant on *Mumsnet*. She notes how, to an outsider without the context and shared language practices, postings may not be as easy to understand.

Mackenzie's research question was "How do *Mumsnet* users negotiate norms of gender, parenting, and motherhood through their digital interactions?" The feminist poststructural lens that she adopts frames a pragmatic research design. This design moves through ethnography and a constructivist grounded theory in the first phase of initial data coding, to a linguistic discursive analysis focused on the precise discourses at play. This eclectic approach to data management and analysis is well explained and seems wholly appropriate. She refers to her work as data *construction* instead of the more commonly used data *collection*. This is a clear and refreshing move on her part, with a convincing discussion as to how the data are

constructed by the data analyst. The data construction stage is where the principles of a grounded theory approach are most apparent in Mackenzie's design, including the uptake of theoretical sampling in order to get the final sample together for the second stage of analysis where she moves on to a linguistic discursive analysis. The first stage ended up with a corpus of 50 threads. Two of these – "Your identity as a mother" and "Can we have a child exchange?" – formed the basis of the second stage of analysis. In both threads were several theoretical codes with sub-themes. For example, "Your identity as a mother" had five theoretical codes attached to it. These included "total motherhood", which itself had a further five subcategories, such as "being a mum" and "mother as 'whole woman'". Mackenzie notes the subject positions inherent in all the categories and subcategories and applies these insights to her consideration of discourses operating in *Mumsnet* talk.

In the second stage of analysis, she identifies eight parenthood discourses working across the data, including: "mother as main parent", "absent father", "child-centric motherhood" and the "good mother". She found that the most pervasive discourse across the data was "gendered parenthood", a discourse which, Mackenzie asserts, places women in restrictive subject positions. It is interesting to note that the key subject positions align with the intensive mothering ideology documented over two decades ago by Sharon Hays (1996). It is both illuminating and slightly depressing that this dominant ideology still pervades contemporary parenting discourse and culture.

Her final analytical move comes in the exploration of how mothers are negotiating, resisting, and subverting these gendered discourses. As we know from the academic literature, the discourses from contemporary parenting cultures can be particularly restrictive for mothers. For example, the child-centric motherhood, documented both here and across the literature, can disempower mothers. However, as Mackenzie illustrates, these discourses can be, and are, resisted by mothers on *Mumsnet*. For instance, she provides examples where attachment parenting is questioned, discussed, and resisted as a particular form of oppressive motherhood. She argues that due to the anonymous nature of online forums, there is more room to negotiate and resist the norms of contemporary parenting cultures, even suggesting that there is room for a "transgressive potential of play and humour" (p. 96) using the thread "Can we have a child exchange?" as an exemplar. This aspect of the book is refreshing; not to see discourses imposed on mothers but instead to see how those on *Mumsnet* are working in almost collectivist ways of resistance to the dominant norms of parenting subcultures.

Overall, this was an interesting and accessible text. Mackenzie has offered a new a venue to see how these expectations of gendered parenting are both performed and resisted in an online setting, building on previous work on parenting discourses (e.g., Hays, 1996). Her study offers another window on contemporary parenting ideologies. Many of her claims from this work resonate with the building literature on contemporary parenting ideologies and offer an in-depth investigation of how these discourses are operating in one of the most popular online parenting platforms within the UK.

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