'Speaking as a mother': A membership categorisation analysis of child-centric talk in a UK daytime television talk show

Laura Kilby[1] and Emily Foster[2]

[1]no institution affiliation
[2]Affiliation not available

January 20, 2022

Abstract

In this study, we explore motherhood as an interactionally emergent identity category which speakers simultaneously construct and lay claim to in talk, and as a category which is imbued with moral expectations of how its incumbents should behave. We analyse 18 chid-centric debates from British daytime television talk show This Morning. We use Membership Categorisation Analysis to explore how, and to what effect, women deploy claims to motherhood. We report 3 main findings; (i) Speakers routinely quantify their motherhood credentials as they develop rights to be heard on child-centric matters; (ii) Speaking as a mother habitually trumps the arguments offered by other speakers, including those with professional expertise; (iii) Any challenge to essentialist norms of motherhood become accountable concerns for speakers. We conclude that whilst there is power in motherhood insomuch as it vests women with expertise and elevates their rights to be heard on child-centric matters, the speakers in our study of mainstream debates about child-centric issues nevertheless construct motherhood in a manner which (re)produces and elevates essentialised notions of gender.

Keywords: Motherhood ; membership categorisation analysis ; gender ; parenting ; discourse analysis; experiential expertise; moral discourse

Introduction

The study of motherhood and motherhood identities remains an enduring concern for feminist research. Mackenzie and Zhao (2021) point to seminal scholars whose work locates and problematises motherhood

as existing within prevailing gendered, heteronormative, and biological essentialist societal discourses. Such work seeks to deconstruct patriarchal frameworks and reveal how expectations and experiences of motherhood are entwined with dominant ideals of gender and womanhood (e.g. Bem, 1993; Rich, 1986). Approaching motherhood as a discourse invites consideration of how differing forms of doing motherhood are variously upheld, contested and (re)produced across differing sites and forms of discourse. Aligned with the broader concept of 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman, 1987), motherhood is not a passive identity that one simply has, rather it is actively worked-up in interaction. Aligning with this approach, our focus is an exploration of motherhood as an interactionally emergent discursive membership category, available as a resource that speakers might orient to, and potentially lay claim to during interaction.

Membership Categorisation Analysis

Approaching motherhood in this way positions us with conversation analysis (CA), and membership categorisation analysis (MCA). CA and MCA originate in the pioneering work of Harvey Sacks (Sacks, 1992) as intertwined branches of the ethnomethodological study of talk-in-interaction. Scholars have debated MCA's status as an ethnomethodological approach distinct from CA (e.g. Fitzgerald, 2012; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002; Schegloff, 2007; Stokoe, 2012), and explored what some have cautioned as a lack of analytic specificity within MCA. Such debates have also re-invigorated research that combines what Housley and Fitzgerald (2015, p. 6) refer to as the MCA "analytic mindset", with the methodological rigour of CA and its focus on structure and sequence. (E.g. Butler and Weatherall, 2006; Fitzgerald and Housley 2002; Goodman and Speer, 2007; Housley, 2002; Housley and Fitzgerald 2009a, 2009b; Author & Author, date; Stokoe, 2003a, 2009).

In his illustration 'The Baby Cried. The mommy picked it up', Sacks (1992), demonstrates that membership categories are inference-rich - we mundanely hear the Baby as *this* Mommy's baby. Sacks' now seminal example is very apt given our focus on motherhood, so we stay with it to elaborate further. The inferential pairing of *this* Baby and *this* Mommy is an example of a Standardised Relational Pair (SRP) which, in this context, exists within a Membership Categorisation Device (MCD) of 'The Family' (Sacks, 1992). This mundane inferential work that occurs as part of everyday sense-making practices is explained by Sacks (1992) via the Hearer's Maxim: "if two or more categories are used to categorise two or more members of some population and those categories can be heard as categories from the same collection, hear them that way" (p. 221).

Categories and the moral order

Categories act as inference-rich filing systems (Stokoe and Attenborough, 2015). The deployment of categories not only invites us to pair certain members or categories, it also brings category expectations into play. It is precisely a concern with 'what we know' about categories, and indeed 'what we expect', of and from category members, that MCA can alert us to. The concept of category predicates (Hester, 1998), points to a host of rights, obligations and knowledge that become mundanely bound up with membership categories (see also Sharrock, 1974; Watson, 1978, 1983). As Jayyusi (1984, 1991) makes plain, MCA invites consideration of how mundane morality is cemented within common sense understandings of how category incumbents *should* behave. Thus, in Sacks' example, the Mommy, picking up the Baby is an unremarkable matter. Jayyusi (1991, p. 240) notes that it is "mundane reasoners" who tie common-sense knowledge to moral praxis: expectations are locked into place by everyday use of category labels. Normative practices are maintained through the most routine interactions (Stokoe, 2003b) and, as Baker (2000; p.111) points out, "the more natural, taken-for-granted and therefore invisible the categorisation work, the more powerful it is".

Motherhood identity

Prior CA/MCA research speaks to our interest in motherhood from differing vantages and includes studies where motherhood identity is the focal interest, and research that takes a broader interest in gender. Stokoe's (2003a) MCA analysis of neighbour disputes examines three gendered categories that are emergent in the data: Mothers, Single Women and Sluts. The analysis reveals how, when responding to complaints, members

orient to mundane assumptions of 'good motherhood'. For example, in responding to concerns about noise, members "reconstruct their noise as normative for 'good' mothers and children" (Stokoe, 2003a, p. 325). Interestingly, the category 'good mother' is not only invoked by members who claim category incumbency, Stokoe (2003a) also reports how activities that are routinely linked to the category of 'good mother' are held up by complainants as activities that some mothers do*not* undertake. Thus, absent activities also become accountable matters. Stokoe highlights that when a disjunction exists between the category 'good mother' and a set of activities, including absent activities, which are not aligned with the category, then a category puzzle emerges which invites alternative membership categorisation. Pointing to the fluidity of membership categories and the multiplicity of available MCDs, including the MCD 'moral types of female', Stokoe (2003a, p. 327) presents the puzzle as "So, what kind of 'mother' could be associated with these sorts of activities?" [and the solution] "In this alternative categorization of a 'mother', a 'bad' mother identity is inferred." Stokoe's (2003a) study both emphasises motherhood as a moral category, and highlights how new or more delineated categories, such as 'bad mother' emerge within the context-driven trajectory of the talk.

Elsewhere, in analysis of an interaction between a counsellor and a mother of a child diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Austin and Fitzgerald (2007) consider category resistance, exploring how the mother pre-empts her possible categorisation as a 'bad mother' and instead works up her parenting behaviours as befitting 'ordinary motherhood'. As the speaker maps her own experiences of motherhood onto this 'ordinary mother' category, she presents her specific behaviours as aligning with category norms. Austin and Fitzgerald's (2007) study of category resistance again emphasises members' sensitivity to motherhood as a moral issue, and demonstrates the locally emergent nature of membership categories, revealing how speakers orient to motherhood as a movable concern in the talk.

Flinkfeld (2017) explores how motherhood identity is occasioned during work-based 'sick leave' meetings in Sweden and reveals motherhood as an interactional resource with variable outcomes. On some occasions, mundane notions of 'good motherhood', (e.g putting children first), provides a resource for members who are resisting a return to work, whilst on other occasions, claiming some level of conflict between the demands of motherhood and those of the workplace leaves mothers vulnerable to challenges, either regarding their parenting ability, or their commitment to the workplace. Thus, what might stand as 'good motherhood' from one vantage becomes an accountable matter from another. In keeping with prior studies, Flinkfeldt's (2017) research stresses that motherhood is "flexibly assembled or 'done' in situated ways and to particular ends" (p. 190), and further points to the importance of context.

Mackenzie's (2017, 2018a, 2018b) research examining Mumsnet discourse, highlights a significant 'child-centric' narrative, and the routine enactment of 'gendered parenthood' producing "feminine mothers and, by extension, masculine fathers" (Mackenzie, 2017; p. 305). Mackenzie (2018a) reflects that, whilst some subversion of traditional motherhood narratives does occur in these contemporary discursive environments, it remains difficult for members to move beyond the normatively gendered boundaries of motherhood whilst maintaining their status as 'good mothers'.

Alongside Mackenzie (2017, 2018a, 2018b), contemporary motherhood studies feature a growing body of interdisciplinary work which focusses on motherhood discourses online. This work variously explores how members go about the business of doing motherhood in environments including open-forum sites such as Mumsnet (Kinloch and Jaworska, 2021), online blogs (Coffey-Glover 2020; Ringrow, 2020), and in more private interpersonal contexts including messaging services such as Whatsapp (Lyons, 2020). Mackenzie and Zhao (2021) highlight that one significant feature of online motherhood interactions is the (re)production of knowledge and expertise.

Lyons' (2020) analysis of an NCT (UK National Childbirth Trust) group's WhatsApp interactions reveals how 'expertise' becomes a moveable feast, shifting between the experiential contribution made by members, and merging experience with information from more traditional expert sources as members co-construct their child-focused knowledge. Other studies that similarly identify the significance of experiential expertise within motherhood online discourse include Hanell and Salö's (2017) analysis of a Swedish online discussion forum that reveals how members' experience comes to stand as forms of knowledge, available for others to draw

upon and use. Elsewhere, Holland's (2019) study of lesbian couples' online journals detailing interactions with professional medical expertise around reproductive health and transitions to parenthood reveals the emergence of what Holland (2019, p.60) describes as "(experiential) queer-mother knowledge" which affords "a valid and valued counterpart to medical knowledge". Lastly, Zaslow's (2012) exploration of mothers' discussions in online health communities reveals members' strong commitment to the value of experiential and instinctive knowledge. Zaslow (2012, p. 1360-61) describes an underlying belief amongst this community whereby

"maternal knowledge is instinctual and that mothers need only to follow their 'mommy intuition' if they want to find the most cogent answers to their questions about diagnoses, parenting, schooling, and treatment options"

Prior literature emphasises two inter-related features of motherhood: Firstly, motherhood is a fundamentally moral category with members routinely enacting the 'right' way to *do* and *be* a 'good mother'; secondly, motherhood is vested with a particular kind of expertise which provides interactional and rhetorical resource for members. Whilst there is always scope to construct and do motherhood differently, when mundane norms of 'good motherhood' are contravened, these become accountable matters, and new or more delineated membership categories such as 'bad mother' potentially emerge.

The present study

Our focus is the study of the how members develop and engage motherhood identity during child-centric debates on a popular UK television chat show. Specifically, we consider how speakers: (i) work up motherhood membership; (ii) navigate and/or reproduce 'good motherhood'; (iii) construct and manage potentially accountable matters.

Public Participation Media

Public Participation Media has an enduring appeal for MCA researchers because it presents analysts with the opportunity to access an environment where 'ordinary people' negotiate their beliefs and opinions regarding everyday issues (Hutchby, 2001). This body of work includes analysis of radio phone-in shows (e.g. Fitzgerald and Housley, 2002; Housley 2002; Housley and Fitzgerald, 2002; Author and Author, date; Ohara and Saft, 2003) and televisions broadcasts (e.g. Bovet, 2009; Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Myers, 2001; Tolson, 2001; Thornborrow 2000, 2007).

Livingstone and Lunt (1994) suggest that television talk shows are more commonly aimed at an 'everyday' audience, and therefore discourses of real-life experience are typically privileged over more abstract expertise. Another distinctive feature of television talk shows is the significance of the studio, and/or viewing audience, whose presence amplifies the publicly performative nature of the interaction (Thornborrow, 2007). Given our interest in the exploration of mundane category use and experiential expertise, television talk shows offer fruitful site for investigation.

Data and procedure

Our data is drawn from *This Morning,* a popular free to air, live UK television daily broadcast show aimed at a daytime audience. Each show dedicates a slot to debate a pre-determined current affairs topic for discussion with invited guests. We collected forty-three debates from broadcasts that aired between February 2016 - March 2019. All debates were publicly available via YouTube at the point of collection. Our inclusion criteria solely required that debates concern child and/or family related issues. Examples include: "Is it okay to tell off other people's children?"; "Should children be weighed in schools?"; "Should your teen share a bed with their partner?". Thus, whilst motherhood is not the central topic, these are debates where motherhood category membership might be engaged by speakers.

The first author watched all debates and identified a subset of eighteen debates for analysis11Access to youtube links for the debates analysed will be provided upon request to the corresponding author. In eleven of these debates, motherhood is explicitly marked, either by participants being categorised by other speakers,

or participants self-categorising as a mother. In the remaining seven debates, speakers orient to motherhood via talk about their children. Each debate lasts an average of six minutes duration. Extended sequences of talk where motherhood category membership was focal were extracted and transcribed to aid further detailed analysis. The first author led the analysis. The second author watched all eighteen debates and contributed to the detailed analysis of the selected extracts.

Analysis

Orienting to Motherhood

We begin with a straightforward example highlighting how motherhood identity is introduced. In the preamble to extract 1, host Holly has framed the discussion by referring to recent media photographs of Kim Kardashian before introducing guest Jess.

Extract 1

1 Holly: you're a- a mu*m* yours*elf* [we've just seen

2 Jess: [yeah

3 Holly: those images it does seem that she's

4 g*e* tting .hhh more and more r*isqué* — would

5 [yeah

6 you be happy for any of your children: (.)

7 eventually to- to follow her—

8 Jess: .hh er:m (.) i thin:k (.) >i'll be honest*no* <

In extract 1, host Holly categorises Jess, stating "you're a mum yourself" (line 1), positioning motherhood as focal to the contribution that Jess will make. Jess's overlapping "yeah" (line 2) reflects her category alignment. They then move to consider matters at hand.

Our next extract comes from a debate about wearing makeup in schools. Following contribution from guest Jenna, who has conveyed strong support for her daughter wearing make-up to school, host Eamonn interjects and invites a contribution from guest Christine.

Extract 2

1 Eamonn: and here's- here- hh from the head*mistress's*

2 point of view <uhhh .hh *whe::n* does that

3 become an issue for you> as to the amount

4 of makeup and how its worn—

5 (0.4)

6 Chris: .hhhh to start with i- i completely empathise

7 with young people and what they ha:ve (.) to

8 go through- (0.2) i've got three children

9 >*twenty-one nineteenfifteen* < we've had *ac* ne

10 .hh we've had other skin conditions .hh

11 we've had the teasing and we've >had to

12 deal with it as a family as well as a

13 school< .hhh

In extract 2, Eamon requests that Christine provide "the head*mistress's* point of view" (lines 1-4), but it is not until line 13 that Christine moves to do so. Instead, after hesitation (line 5) Christine undertakes to establish her own identity as a mother. Christine explicitly marks her motherhood by referring to her "three children" (lines 6- 8). She then offers alignment with her co-incumbent Jenna, via a three-part list (Jefferson, 1990) referring to "acne", "other skin conditions" and "the teasing" (lines 9 - 11), all of which are direct reference to concerns Jenna has previously introduced. Christine's use of the definite article in "the teasing", strengthens the sense of collective experience, suggesting a phenomenon familiar to those listening (Du Bois, 1980). In asserting "we've had to deal with it as a family as well a school" (lines 12-13), first-person plural pronouns invoke both Family and School MCDs, enabling Christine to speak as a mother *and* as a headteacher. This then becomes the springboard from which Christine subsequently moves to disagree with Jenna's stance.

Motherhood credentialing

In our data, motherhood identity is often treated as the basis for a speakers' contribution, and experience as a mother, is routinely deemed to provide sufficient topic-relevant expertise (see Fitzgerald and Housely, 2002) to be heard on a whole host of matters. As mothers engage in these debates, they undertake manoeuvres which qualify, and indeed, quantify their credentials as experts. In the following extracts, we examine one such manoeuvre which features prominently in our data. We refer to it as the 'how many-how old' manoeuvre.

Extract 3

1 Rachel: yeah but if you- (.) <if you weigh*chi:ldren* >

2 once a year .hh then >you don't know whether<

3 at *that* point when you weigh them they

4 might just be about to have a growth spurt—

5 i mean i kn*ow* - i- i've got three daughters—

6 .hh and i know that [.hh PSbefore a child goes

7 Eamonn: [uhuh

8 Rachel: up [they do sometimes go *out* a little bitPS

9 Eamonn: [yeah

In extract 3, Rachel develops an argument founded on claims regarding expectable childhood growth spurts. At line 5, she self-interrupts to attest to her own experiential expertise on these matters "i mean i kn*ow* - i- i've got three daughters", before returning to her wider stance. In the next extract we see how information regarding 'how many' children is conjoined with 'how old'.

Extract 4

1 Clare: well uh- (.) my children just to gain a bit

2 of perspective here are twenty (.) nineteen (.)

3 sixteen- ahh nearly sixteen and *four* teen

4 (0.2) so i have four uh=

5 Roch: =PSso y- so you're through it no(hh)w—PS

In extract 4, Clare lists her children's ages (lines 2-3) before confirming how many children she has (line 4). As with Rachel in extract 3, the 'how many-how old' manoeuvre underscores Claire's experiential expertise.

The same manoeuvre is also evident in Extract 2 where Christine states "i've got three children >*twenty-one nineteenfifteen* <" (lines 8-9).

By the common-sense inference that a mother's job is to raise her children (Mackenzie, 2018), this credentialing of 'how many-how old' serves as a metric by which members both construct and position themselves within an emergent category of *Mother-cum-Expert* . In the example above, Clare's interactional achievement is indicated as host Rochelle infers a success story, whereby Clare is "through it now" (line 5). In our data, where mothers are engaged in stance taking around issues of children and family life, motherhood is constructed by recourse to this interactional manoeuvre which marks them out as 'mother of x -many children (of x ages)' and thereby serves to qualify and quantify the extent of one's expertise. Across the 18 debates analysed, the how many-how old manoeuvre is used on 10 occasions by participants evidencing their own credentials, and a further six times by hosts to credential participants.

Doing it 'right': Motherhood as moral business

We now turn to consider the interactional work of motherhood. Building on prior research which emphasises the fundamentally moral nature of motherhood, we place our focus on moments of disagreement between speakers as particularly fertile ground for members' moral work.

Extract 5 involves mothers, Lizzie and Anna, debating whether teenagers' partners should be allowed to stay over in the family home. Lizzie is supportive, whilst Anna is not.

Extract 5

1 Lizz: =*that* 's where there are- that's whe:re y- become

2 [a pr*o* blem

3 Anna: [but there's- i have [*four* ch*il* dren-

4 Lizz: [are you saying they're not

5 [telling you everything—

6 Anna: [i have- yeah but i don't want to know everything

At line 1 Lizzie assumes the role of Problematiser (Thornborrow, 2007), and Anna moves to respond, presenting her 'how many-how old' credentials (line 3) but Lizzie does not cede. Lizzie's overlap (line 4) moves to undermine Anna's credibility, questioning her credentials as a 'good mother' by querying the level of openness in Anna's relationship with her children (line 4-5). In response Anna asserts "I don't want to know everything" (line 6). We see here how mundane moral expectations are tied to the category of 'good mother', but also how these expectations are emergent in the interaction (Jayyusi, 1984), and remain malleable in the hands of members. Just as Lizzie constructs 'children should keep no secrets' as a predicate of 'good motherhood', Anna undoes this category-tie, reframing this not as an issue by which her motherhood fails, but as a feature with no place in her own measure of 'good motherhood'.

In our next extract, mothers Shona and Karen discuss leaving children alone in cars.

Extract 6

1 Shona: i:t's (.) a constantly evolving situation as

2 a parent=

3 Phil: =do you ag*ree* with this Karen—

4 Karen: .hh <no:: i don't agree> *at all* and i would say

5 (.) any newborn baby (.) i mea:n- mi:ne are six

6 and eight .h you can ch*ok* e you can throw *up*

7 .hhh y'know in less than a minute that baby

8 could have been *dead* in the c*ar*

In response to Shona's stance, Karen asserts strong opposition "<no:: i don't agree> *at all*"(line 4), rejecting any shared experience implied by Shona's reference to the "situation as a parent" (lines 1-2). Karen then presents a generalised account concerning "any newborn baby" (line 5), before interrupting her own argument to bolster her credentials via the 'how many-how old' manoeuvre. Karen then moves to a bottom-line argument (Edwards et al, 1995), where "in less than a minute that baby could have been *dead* " (lines 7-8).

We now consider interactions between *Mother-cum-Experts* and *topic-relevant Experts* who do not make a claim to motherhood category membership. The debate in Extract 7, was previously introduced in Extract 4. Prior to Extract 7, Clare has already categorised herself as 'a busy mum'.

Extract 7

1 Hala: and i see that as an eating disorder

2 [special*i:st* .hh

3 Clare: [but- but you wouldn't- but wouldn't force

4 a child t- to *eat* (.) to stuff themselves in

5 a Henry the eighth style [*ban* quet (.) what

6 Hala: [well-

7 Clare: you would *do* is you'd have p*or* tion control

8 .h you're a [*responsible parent* .hh you're

9 Hala: [but-

10 Clare: giving them a wide variety of nutrition

In extract 7, Hala asserts her topic-relevant Expertise as an "eating disorder specialist" (lines 1-2), credentialing her rights to be heard on the matter. Clare interrupts, with a tongue-in-cheek remark about a "Henry the eighth style banquet" (line 5). Invoking a trope of responsible parenting (lines 7-8), Clare both aligns her own actions with well-worn expectations of what a 'good mother' should do, and by use of the generalising person pronoun "you", she elevates a claim whereby all "responsible" parents are expert when it comes to managing children's weight. Clare further bolsters her argument by asserting wisdom related to her interlocutor's field of topical expertise, with references to "portion control" and "a wide variety of nutrition" (lines 7, 10). Aligned with prior findings where parents engage in debates with professional experts (E.g. Holland, 2019), we witness Clare increasingly negate the value of Hala's topic-relevant contribution as she assumes the role of *Mother-cum-Expert.*

The next debate concerns homework. Ruth hosts, and Richard has been introduced as a secondary school teacher.

Extract 8

1 Richard: it's often not the role of the p*ar* ent to be the

2 one there to n*a:g* .hhh and the- when i go in to

3 advise parents how to- (.) to coach th*em* how to

4 help their- their children=

5 Ruth: =but you have to be the one to na:g R*i* chard (.)

6 you have to because if they're not doing i:t (.)

7 you know they're going to get into trou:ble

8 >or letters are coming home< .hh so*ev* ery *ev* ening

9 >i say to my son< .hh have you got any homework—

In extract 8, topic-relevant Expert Richard asserts his opinion concerning "the role of the parent" (line 1), before contrasting this with his own role as 'advisor' (lines 2-4). Ruth then self-selects and challenges Richard's argument (lines 5-9), abandoning her interactional host role and instead assuming her the role of *Mother-cum-Expert* , which she marks by reference to "my son" (line 9). Again, we see how topic-relevant Expertise, revered in other contexts, is undone, not by the interactional power of the 'host' but by the expertise of Ruth's motherhood.

Our analysis thus far reveals that motherhood category membership offers significant interactional currency for speakers when it comes to matters concerning children and family life. We see members readily self-categorise or take up host-assigned membership. We also witness speakers re-locating from other host-assigned topic-relevant membership categories before making their substantive contribution in these debates. In these child-centric contexts, a category of *Mother-cum-Expert* emerges with significant interactional benefits, and when *Mother-cum-Experts* embrace the norms of 'good mother', members' category rights become further emboldened with a significant moral capacity to elevate one's own position whilst resisting, demoting, or rejecting the arguments of those who reside outside of the category, including *topic-relevant Experts* .

Accountable matters

Our final point of investigation concerns how motherhood is interactionally relied upon and reinforced, such that gendered norms of womanhood and motherhood become increasingly engrained facets of an "intersubjectively knowable world" (Jayyusi, 1991, p. 236). In this section we therefore consider moments in our data where members present 'problems' or vulnerabilities for motherhood. We describe these as the barbed edges of motherhood.

In the following debate, the speaker Alice has been sharing her concerns about the environment and future sustainability. It is against this backdrop that she engages in a debate about opting out of motherhood.

Extract 9

1 Alice: and with having *fam* ily as well it's .hhh

2 th(h)at's PSwhat most of us *want* ri:ght—PS and

3 you know >me and my partner< i'm twenty five

4 he's just about to turn thi:rty we've got our

5 PSown flat (h) you know it's- this is thePS

6 time of lifePS and .hh

Within the context of a discussion about decisions to become a mother (or not), Alice accounts for her decision not to have children. She orients to a widely shared desirability of motherhood with the collective "most of us", appealing to those who recognise such feelings with the tag question "right" (line 2), and the affiliative discourse marker "you know" (lines 3, 5). Alice then lists credentials that mark her out as a *potential Mother* , with reference to "me and my partner" (line 3); use of gendered pronouns; and the announcements "i'm twenty five he's just about to turn thi:rty" (lines 3-4) and "we've got our PSown flat" (lines 4-5). Thus, fulfilling of a host of normative criteria: being in a heterosexual relationship; a certain age bracket; and having appropriate resources and stability. In meeting these criteria, Alice's decision increasingly emerges as a moral dilemma and an accountable matter. Thus, whilst making an autonomous agentic decision to *not* become a mother, Alice simultaneously upholds traditional feminised, gendered ideals of what women*should* desire. In constructing her own decision as morally precarious, Alice offers an apologetic account for locating herself in the category of *intentionally childless woman* .

Resistance work

Our remaining extracts further explore the sharp edges of motherhood by considering some of the very few occasions in our data where speakers either seek to challenge some aspect of normative motherhood, or who seemingly present a threat to it in the eyes of their interlocutors.

In extract 10, the host is Holly, and the speakers are Ally who has been categorised as a *Mother-cum-Expert* , and Holly (here Hol.) who is categorised as *intentionally childless* .*Extract 10* 1 Ally: but (.) you've *cho* sen (.) NOT to have children

2 Hol.: yeah

3 Ally: and i respect that decision .hh *bu* t i think you

4 will re*gre::t* that far- further down the track .hh

5 [>what happens< if you

6 Hol.: [we::ll (.) i (.) *def* initely won't but-

7 Ally: mEET somebody- well >i'm just saying< what happens

8 if you DO meet somebody— who *des* perately wants to

9 have a child=

In this debate, which ostensibly concerns whether being a mother equates to being a better boss, Ally presents a pervasive societal assumption that a woman will later regret the decision not to have children. Ally emphasises that her interlocutor has "chosen" this path (line 1), marking Holly out as an intentionally childless, which Holly accepts (line 2). Ally offers the cliched assertion that she "respects" Holly's decision, but her argument appears incongruous with such respect. From her *Mother-cum-Expert* position, Ally projects category-earned wisdom, built upon "*implicit moral judgements, claims and obligations*" (Heritage and Lindstrom, 1998, p. 398), that Holly will "regret" her choice (line 4). Holly interrupts and attempts to reject Ally's argument (line 6), stating "i (.) *def* initely won't", but Ally does not cede, and instead continues to assert her position. Ally's question "what happens< if you mEET somebody" (lines 5, 7-8) assumptively appeals to the heteronormative SRP of Mother-Father, invoking the common-sense obligation, bound with expectations of heterosexuality and monogamy, that 'meeting somebody' is a step towards the ultimate goal of motherhood. The debate between Holly and Ally continues in extract 11.

Extract 11

1 Hol.: in what way do:es changing nappies translate to:

2 (.) running a boardroom— exactly

3 Ally: if you can change a n*a* ppy (0.4) you can change the

4 w*or* ld

5 Hol.: well i can change nappies and i don't have a

6 child so:—

Here Holly uses "changing nappies" (line 1) as a category-resonant descriptor of motherhood, contrasting this basic task of motherhood with an empowered image of a Businessperson as capable of "running a boardroom" (line 2). Ally accepts and reframes this category descriptor, hyperbolically equating changing nappies with changing the world (lines 3-4). Both speakers rely on common sense knowledge of the category-bound activity as an identifier of motherhood. In lines 5-6, however, Holly problematises this categorical tie, reframing the ability to change nappies as not category-bound to motherhood. This offers a striking demonstration of the capacity for normative category expectations to be manipulated within argumentative talk, revealing the instability of such knowledge and how it can be reconstructed in various, and often contradictory, ways.

Our final extract, concerning a debate about gender-neutral school uniform, illuminates how motherhood incumbents, on occasion, seek to uphold their argument by (re)producing and policing category rights, norms, and values as qualities and concepts that are potentially only comprehensible to those who are members of the category.

Extract 12

1 Angela: .hh you know as *pa* rents we put up with the

2 [*backlash* .hh

3 Paris: [(hh)

4 Angela: from all of this [as well (.) and i mean you

5 Paris: [(hh)

6 Angela: can chuckle as much as you like but as a

7 p*arent* you know >you might not ap*preciate* <

8 .hh [this is- this is how it fee:ls .hh

9 Paris: [((rolls eyes))

Angela positions herself within a category of "*pa* rents" (line 1), expressing the "*backlash* " (line 2) faced by members of this category due to gender-neutral children's clothing. Paris, who has been accorded *topic-relevant Expertise* as a Transgender Rights Activist earlier in the debate, indicates her distain for Angela's position with laughter (lines 3, 5). Angela retaliates with an 'us and them' contrast device (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2009b), echoing her phrase "as a parent" (line 7), followed with the accusatory address "you might not ap*preciate* " (line 7). This constructs Paris's 'outsider' status, as someone potentially unable to understand "how it fee:ls" (line 8). Invoking her *Mother-cum-Expert* incumbency in a manner which explicitly locates Paris as an outsider, Angela elevates her rights to be heard and undermines her interlocutor's expertise and her capacity to appreciate an alternate perspective.

A further consideration of context illuminates the inherent normative force of Angela's words, demonstrating the "mundane mechanics of prejudice" (Housley and Fitzgerald, 2009b, p. 352). Guest Paris, a self-identifying transgender women, is a well-known public figure who regularly engages with the UK media to speak out on issues of trans-rights. Paris further orients to her identity as a trans woman throughout this debate. As such, Angela's argument takes on an increasing cisnormative force which not only discounts Paris' argument on the basis that she does not have membership of the category mother, but, given mundane notions that situate cisnormative gender-based criteria as a fundamental requirement of motherhood, Paris is hearable as someone who *cannot* occupy the category. Paris' performed boredom (eye-roll, line 9; laughter, lines 3, 5) suggests her familiarity with such challenges. This exchange exemplifies how the discursive creation of moral knowledge reinforces existing societal norms (Jayyusi, 1984, 1991). Moreover, it demonstrates how wide-scale prejudice is routinely generated via the use of 'us and them' discourse on an interactional level, relying upon normative expectations as constitutive of moral knowledge, and thus reinforcing the exclusion of 'outsider' individuals or minority groups from being entitled to the same moral rights as 'insiders'.

Discussion

In this article we examine how motherhood is engaged and enacted in daytime television talk-show debates about parenting. Our findings build on prior research which reveal motherhood as a moral category (E.g. Austin & Fitzgerald, 2007; Flinkfeldt, 2017; Stokoe, 2003a), and one that is vested with expertise (E.g. Hanell and Salo, 2017; Hollan, 2019; Mackenzie and Zhao, 2021). Our analysis offers further insight on both counts.

Firstly, in examining how motherhood category membership is worked up, we have identified a common use of what we refer to as the *how many-how old* device. We suggest that quantifying the number and age of children serves as a powerful rhetorical mechanism which qualifies members' expertise, and thus their rights to be heard on matters of children and parenting. Further research might examine if this device is engaged in other contexts where members are speaking as mothers, and indeed consider if it is similarly engaged when members are speaking from other parental or child-centric identities.

Across our data, members consistently foreground their arguments with assertions of their motherhood identity and thus, their claim to expertise on child-centric matters. Moreover, those occupying the category of mother routinely disempower the arguments of speakers occupying other expert categories. The fact that our analysis focuses on a setting where the stakes and/or need for professional expertise might not be paramount (I.e. compared to a health or educational setting), is perhaps a factor here. However, witnessing members in our data electing to set aside other available forms of professional expertise, preferring instead to speak as a mother during these debates, emphasises the rhetorical power of motherhood over other, elite membership categories. This is especially notable given that in, other non child-centric contexts, significant interactional power is typically wielded by professional experts during debates with lay speakers. (c.f. Author & Author, date).

Lastly, in our analysis, the construction of motherhood routinely relies upon and (re)produces patriarchal, heteronormative, cisgendered norms. This differs from the findings of Mackenzie's (2018a) analysis of Mumsnet discourse, which identifies some degree of gender-norm subversion. We suggest that the differing contexts in which the talk occurs may be a relevant factor here. Daytime television talk shows are designed to appeal to a female-dominated home-based audience (Livingstone and Lunt, 1994; Ohara and Saft, 2003). In contrast, as Mackenzie (2018a) notes, Mumsnet users are likely to be working mothers. Whilst we don't have any demographic data of the women who participated in the debates we analysed, what we want to emphasise here is that the talk we analysed was *oriented* towards a predominantly female stay-at-home audience. Thus the (re)production and wholesale communication of 'traditional' motherhood through the medium of daytime television shows both speaks to a captive female audience and potentially also works to keep its audience captive.

On the limited occasions in our data where speakers either intentionally or unintentionally transgress the normative bounds of motherhood, it becomes an accountable matter. We witness this when members contravene the moral expectation that women *should* desire motherhood, and instead elect not to have children. On such occasions, women are not only held accountable by other members about their choices, but in some instances, they also hold themselves to account, marking out their choices as 'problematic'. (See Wager, 2000 for discussion of the complexities experienced by women who chose not to have children).

Our analysis also indicates how biologically essentialist constructions of motherhood are wielded in a manner which pre-emptively denies some women possible category membership. We present one such occasion which reveals how a trans woman is subtly excluded from possible motherhood category incumbency, before her non-membership is then used to negate the argument she seeks to make. Research on parenting experiences of trans woman and men remains in its infancy (although see Averett, 2021; Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Ryan, 2009), and we do not have sufficient data to add anything substantial to current knowledge. Our one example points to the live enactment of prejudice based upon a particularised and essentialised construction of motherhood and we align our interests with Averett (2021, p.291) who asks "What would it look like to de-couple the concept of mothering from female – often assumed to mean childbearing – bodies?" We suggest that this is an area of future work that discursive psychologists are well placed to contribute to.

In sum, our findings suggest that whilst there is power in motherhood insomuch as it vests members with expertise and elevates their rights to be heard on child-centric matters, the concept of motherhood itself, at least as it plays out in these popularised, mainstream contexts, nevertheless serves to reinforce essentialised notions of gender which at best constrain, and at worst deny women's agency. Moreover, they oppress women, and indeed mothers who do not conform to biologically essentialised constructions of womanhood.

Acknowledgements

To be inserted

References

Averett, K. (2021). Queer parents, gendered embodiment and the de-essentialisation of motherhood. *Feminist Theory* , 22(2), 284–304. https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700121989226

Austin, H., & Fitzgerald, R. (2007). Resisting categorisation: An ordinary Mother. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* , 30(3), 36.1-36.13.

Baker, C. D. (2000). Locating culture in action: Membership categorization in texts and talk. In A. Lee A & C. Poynton (Eds.),*Culture and Text: Discourse and Methodology in Social Re-search and Cultural Studies* (pp. 99–113). Routledge.

Bem, S. L. (1993). *The Lenses of Gender: Transforming the debate on sexual inequality* . Yale University Press.

Biblarz, T. J., & Savci, E. (2010). Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Families. *Journal of Marriage and Family* , 72, 480–497.

Bovet, A. (2009). Configuring a television debate: Categorisation, Questions and Answers. In W. Housley and R. Fitzgerald (Eds.),*Media, policy and interaction* (pp. 27-48). Ash-gate Publishing.

Butler, C., & Weatherall, A. (2006). No, we're not playing families: Membership categorization in children's play. *Research on Language and Social Interaction* 39, 441–470.

Coffey-Glover, L. (2020). The boob diaries: Discourses of breastfeeding in 'exclusive pumping' blogs. *Discourse, Context & Media,* 38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100446.

Edwards, D., Ashmore, M., & Potter, J. (1995). Death and Furniture: The Rhetoric, Politics and Theology of Bottom Line Arguments against Relativism. *History of the Human Sciences,* 8, 25-49. https://doi.org/10.1177/095269519500800202.

Flinkfeldt, M. (2017). What mothers do: Motherhood as a resource for negotiating sick-leave legitimacy in Swedish sickness insurance interactions. *NORA - Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research* , 25(3), 179-194. https://doi.org/10.1080/08038740.2017.1380698

Fitzgerald, R. (2012). Membership categorization analysis: Wild and promiscuous or simply the joy of Sacks? *Discourse Studies,* 14(3), 305–311.

Fitzgerald, R., & Housley, W. (2002). Identity, categorization and sequential organization: The sequential and categorical flow of identity in a radio phone-in. *Discourse & Society,* 13(5), 579–602.Goodman, S., & Speer, S. A. (2007). Category use in the construction of asylum seekers. *Critical Discourse Studies,* 4(2), 165–185.

Hanell, L., & Salo, L. (2017). Nine months of entextualizations: Discourse and knowledge in an online discussion forum thread for expectant parents. In C. Kerfoot & K. Hyltenstam (Eds.),*Entangled Discourses: South-North orders of visibility* (pp. 154-170). Routledge.

Hester, S. (1998) Describing 'deviance' in school: Recognizably educational psychological problems. In C Antaki & S Widdicombe S (Eds.), *Identities in Talk* (pp. 133-150). SAGE.

Holland, S. (2019). Constructing queer mother-knowledge and negotiating medical authority in online lesbian pregnancy journals. *Sociology of Health & Illness* , 41(1), 52-66.

Housley, W. (2002). Moral discrepancy and 'fudging the issue' in a radio news interview. *Sociology,* 36(1), 5–23.

Housley, W., & Fitzgerald, R. (2002). The reconsidered model of membership categorization. *Qualitative Research,* 2(1), 59–74.

Housley, W., & Fitzgerald, R. (2009a.) Membership categorization, culture and norms in action. *Discourse and Society,* 20(3), 345-362.

Housley, W., & Fitzgerald, R. (2009b). Membership category work in policy debate. In W. Housley & R. Fitzgerald (Eds.), *Media, policy and interaction* (pp. 13-25). Ashgate Publishing.

Housley, W., & Fitzgerald, R. (2015). *Advances in membership categorisation analysis* . SAGE.

Hutchby, I. (2001). Witnessing: The use of first-hand knowledge in legitimating lay opinions on talk radio. *Discourse Studies,* 3(4), 481–497.

Jayyusi, L. (1984). *Categorisation and the Moral Order* . Routledge.

Jayyusi, L. (1991). Values and moral judgement: communicative praxis as moral order. In G. Button (Ed.), *Ethnomethodology and the Human Sciences* (pp. 227-251). Cambridge University Press.

Jefferson, G. (1990). List construction as a task and resource. In G. Psathas (Ed.), *Interaction competence* (pp. 63-92). University Press of America.

** Author Reference to insert

Kinloch, K., & Jaworska, S. (2021). 'Your mind is part of your body': Negotiating the maternal body in online stories of postnatal depression on Mumsnet. *Discourse, Context and Media* , 39. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100456.

Livingstone, S., & Lunt, P. (1994). *Talk on Television: Audience Participation and Public Debate* . Routledge.

Lyons, A. (2020). Negotiating the expertise paradox in new mothers' WhatsApp group interactions. *Discourse, Context & Media,* 37. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2020.100427

Mackenzie, J. (2017). "Can we have a child exchange?": Constructing and subverting the 'good mother' through play in Mumsnet Talk.*Discourse & Society,* 28(3), 296-392.

Mackenzie, J., (2018a). "Good mums don't, apparently, wear make-up": Negotiating discourses of gendered parenthood in Mumsnet Talk.*Gender and Language,* 12(1), 114-135.

Mackenzie, J., (2018b). *Language, Gender and Parenthood Online: Negotiating Motherhood in Mumsnet Talk* . Routledge.

Mackenzie, J., & Zhao, S. (2021). Motherhood online: Issues and opportunities for discourse analysis. *Discourse, Context and Media* , 40. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2021.100472

Myers, G. (2001). 'I'm out of it; you guys argue': Making an issue of it on The Jerry Springer Show. In A. Tolson (Ed.), *Television Talk Shows: Discourse, Performance, Spectacle* (pp. 173-191). Erlbaum.

Ohara, Y., & Saft, S. (2003). Using Conversation Analysis to Track Gender Ideologies in Social Interaction: toward a Feminist Analysis of a Japanese Phone-in Consultation TV Program. *Discourse and Society,*14(2), 153-172.

Rich, A. (1986). *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as experience and institution* . WW Norton & Company.

Ringrow, H. (2020). "I can feel myself being squeezed and stretched, moulded and grown, and expanded in my capacity to love loudly and profoundly": Metaphor and religion in motherhood blogs.*Discourse, Context & Media,* 37. https://doi.org/0.1016/j.dcm.2020.100429

Ryan, M. (2009). Beyond Thomas Beatie: Trans Men and the New Parenthood. In: Rachel Epstein (Ed.) *Who's Your Daddy? And Other Writings on Queer Parenting* (pp. 139-150). Sumach Press.

Sacks, H. (1992). *Lectures on Conversation, Vols I and II* . In G. Jefferson (Ed.). Blackwell.

Schegloff, E. A. (2007). A tutorial on membership categorization.*Journal of Pragmatics,* 39(3), 462–482.

Sharrock, W. W. (1974). On owning knowledge. In R. Turner (Ed.)*Ethnomethodology* (pp. 45-53). Penguin.

Stokoe, E. H. (2003a). Mothers, Single Women and Sluts: Gender, Morality and Membership Categorization in Neighbour Disputes. *Feminism & Psychology,* 13(3), 317-344.

Stokoe, E. H. (2003b). Doing Gender, Doing Categorisation: Recent Developments in Language and Gender Research. *International Sociolinguistics* , 2(1), 1-12.

Stokoe, E. (2009). Doing actions with identity categories: complaints and denials in neighbor disputes. T*ext and Talk,* 29(1), 75-97.

Stokoe, E. (2012). Moving forward with membership categorization analysis: Methods for systematic analysis. *Discourse Studies,*14(3), 277–303.

Stokoe, E., & Attenborough, F. (2015). Prospective and Retrospective Categorization: Category proffers and inferences in social interaction and rolling news media. In R. FItzgerald and W. Housley (Eds.),*Advances in membership categorisation analysis* (pp. 51-70). SAGE.

Thornborrow, J. (2000). Principal, plausibility and the historic present: the construction of conflicting accounts in public participation TV. *Language in Society,* 29, 357–377.

Thornborrow, J. (2007). Narrative, opinion and situated argument in talk show discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics* , 39(8), 1436–1453. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2007.04.001

Tolson, A. (2001). *Television Talk Shows: Discourse, Performance, Spectacle* . Erlbaum.

Wager, M. I. (2000). Childless by Choice? Ambivalence and the Female Identity. *Feminism & Psychology* , 10(3), 389-395. doi:10.1177/0959353500010003010

Watson, D. R. (1983). The presentation of 'victim' and 'motive' in discourse: The case of police interrogations and interviews.*Victimology: An International Journal,* 8(1–2), 31–52.

Watson, D. R. (1978). Categorizations, authorization and blame negotiation in conversation. *Sociology* 12(1), 105–113.

West, C., & Zimmerman, D. (1987). Doing gender. *Gender and Society* , 1(2), 121-151.

Zaslow, E. (2012). Revalorizing feminine ways of knowing: The challenge to biomedical epistemology in an online mothers' health community.*Information, Communication & Society* , 15(9), 1352-1372.