***Language, Gender and Parenthood Online: Negotiating
Motherhood in Mumsnet Talk***
Jai Mackenzie (2019)
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Reviewed by Laura Teichert

In her book *Language, Gender and Parenthood Online: Negotiating Motherhood in Mumsnet Talk*, Jai Mackenzie closely examines through the lens of feminist poststructuralist discourse theory (Baxter 2003; Mackenzie 2018) the linguistic characteristics used in the discussion forum *Mumsnet Talk*. What results is a nuanced exploration of parenthood, and more specifically motherhood, in a digital age.

The book is comprised of seven chapters and is an expansion on her doctoral dissertation. Chapter 1 introduces the purpose of the study and explains the site of study: a discussion forum, *Mumsnet Talk*, where users of the popular British parenting site Mumsnet can share experiences, ask for help and offer support to one another. Chapters 2 and 3 define the 'feminist poststructuralist framework' which informs the rest of book. In these chapters, Mackenzie conceptualises the social constructs of 'gender' and 'parenthood' with an emphasis placed on how these social constructs are negotiated in digital contexts. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the study's methodology and outlines data collection and analysis. This qualitative study considered the bulk of *Mumsnet Talk* threads present between April and September 2014; however, an in-depth linguistic analysis was ultimately conducted on two salient *Mumsnet* topic threads: 'Your identity as a

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mother' and 'Can we have a child exchange' (43). Included in this chapter is a description of the novel ethical considerations Mackenzie made while researching a public website.

Through analysis of knowledge, power and subjectivity, Mackenzie identified eight discourses permeating the two Mumsnet threads: "gendered parenthood", "child-centric motherhood", "mother as main parent", "absent fathers", "commercialized motherhood", "classed motherhood", "equal parenting" and "individuality" (57). She details these and highlights the specific linguistic mechanisms used to construct them in Chapter 5. In contrast, Chapter 6 describes how Mumsnet users expressed their displeasure of 'restrictive parental subject positions' (89) and the strategies used to negotiate and subvert these positions. By framing her linguistic analysis from a feminist poststructuralist perspective, Mackenzie spotlights the resources and strategies Mumsnet users employed to position themselves within or outside of dominant discourses. Specifically, Mackenzie identifies double-voicing, evaluation, alignment and play as means to subvert positionality within the dominant discourse. The final chapter calls for continued research into the constructs of parenthood, especially in a broader range of contexts.

The strengths in the book lie with Mackenzie's commitment to feminist poststructuralist theory while examining the discursive practices of parents in *Mumsnet Talk*. This framework has allowed her to identify the linguistic mechanisms through which the eight discourses were taken up or negotiated, as well as helped her demonstrate how Mumsnet users interrogated and disrupted 'the "common-sense" assumptions about gender and parenthood' (4) and show multiple perspectives of how gender and parenthood are taken up as social constructs. Importantly, Mackenzie introduces the term 'gendered parenthood' as a discourse and reflects on how it intersects with and relates to other discourses, such as 'mother as main parent', 'absent fathers' or 'child-centric motherhood'. Additionally, this work considers how the discourses permeating Mumsnet and similar parent talk forums continue to marginalise same-sex, nonbinary and kinship caregiving.

However, in the eyes of this reviewer, the most significant contribution of Mackenzie's book is the ethical consideration employed in data collection. Although the forum was initially conceptualised as a public space whereby participants waived a right to confidentiality, privacy and autonomy, Mackenzie came to problematise this assumption. As her positionality shifted from observer to participant, she reconsidered the taken-for-granted notion of 'public forum' and privacy. Mackenzie explained that, through analysis, it became clear many Mumsnet users valued privacy and anonymity, as users 'exercise[ed] their autonomy and

agency in imaginative ways, in order to control and shape the accessibility of their posts and the degree to which they could be identified as individual users' (52). Therefore, Mackenzie sought consent from Mumsnet users before sharing data from her study. This decision is paramount and opens methodological discussions beyond general public/private dichotomies to encourage nuanced conversations about research ethics in digital spaces.

Ultimately, in this book, Mackenzie has highlighted how even in open and egalitarian spaces like Mumsnet it can be difficult for parents to describe themselves beyond restrictive gender norms. There is evidence that users can negotiate and subvert these norms, yet gendered discourses continue to pervade seemingly egalitarian spaces. Mackenzie has made a strong case for increased use of feminist poststructuralist theory to inform linguistic analysis of constructions of parenthood in online spaces in order for a wider range of parental voices and perspectives to be heard and understood.

References

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- Mackenzie, Jai (2018) 'Good mums don't, apparently, wear make-up': negotiating discourses of gendered parenthood in Mumsnet Talk'. *Gender and Language* 12(1): 114–135. <https://doi.org/10.1558/genl.31062>