

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

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

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journals.sagepub.com/home/fap**Emily Foster**

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Abstract

In this study, we explore motherhood as an interactionally emergent identity category that speakers construct and lay claim to in talk, and as a category that is imbued with moral expectations of how incumbents should behave. We analyse 18 child-focussed debates from British daytime television talk show, *This Morning*. Engaging a postfeminist framework, we use membership categorisation analysis to explore how, and to what effect, women deploy claims to motherhood. We report three main findings: (a) Speakers routinely quantify their motherhood credentials in the development of a “mother-cum-expert” identity; (b) speakers who construct motherhood in accordance with neoliberal norms of “good motherhood” habitually trump the arguments offered by other speakers, including those with professional expertise; (c) any challenge to essentialist norms of womanhood and/or motherhood become accountable matters. We conclude that whilst there is power in motherhood inasmuch as it vests some women with expertise and elevates their rights to be heard on child-focussed matters, the speakers in our study nevertheless construct motherhood in a manner that (re)produces and elevates essentialised notions of gender and narrow versions of motherhood.

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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, hetero-normative, 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).

McRobbie (2015) reveals how, under the neoliberal drivers of the postfeminist age, feminism is turned in on itself, with women increasingly self-regulating and competing against one another in their pursuit of the “good life.” McRobbie (2015) coins this as the postfeminist pursuit of “the perfect.” Correspondingly, doing good motherhood in the postfeminist arena involves the enactment of intensive mothering that prizes individualism and promotes narratives of choice and personal empowerment (Lazard, 2022; McRobbie, 2013, 2015; Thornton, 2014). Domestic life has been reinvented, professionalised, and sold back to women as desirable. As McRobbie (2013) puts it:

The well run “corporate family” endorses the “intensification of mothering” as a mode of investment in the human capital of infants and children, while also countering any presumed loss of status on the part of the stay-home mother who now directs her professional skills to ensuring the unassailable middle class status of her children. (p. 130)

In her exploration of family life and mediated motherhood, McRobbie (2013) traces the role of popular media in upholding versions of motherhood that elevate a vision of the White, middle-class, “virtuous” mother who is expert in her domestic role. McRobbie (2013) points to the mainstays of traditional media formats that target women, such as advice columns or problem pages, which serve to school wives and mothers in how to attain the good life. She contends that these early formats provide the blueprint for modern-day women’s magazines and television shows, as well as digital and social media platforms, and emphasises the regulatory power of mediated maternalism, which bombards women with aspirations of middle-class intensive motherhood and promotes narrow ideals of marriage, motherhood, and domesticity as markers of the good life.

Contemporary feminist research has explored the mediated enactment of motherhood across a host of online and social media platforms (e.g., Astudillo-Mendoza & Cifuentes-Zunino, 2022; Capdevila et al., 2022; Lazard, 2022; Mackenzie, 2017, 2018, 2019; Pedersen, 2016) and, whilst the online environment has certainly created new and expansive sites for mediated motherhood, McRobbie’s (2013) work also emphasises that more traditional media outlets, including the popular press and daytime television,

continue to provide platforms that serve the mediated enactment of motherhood. Our interest is in motherhood as it plays out between speakers in live interactive settings on daytime television.

Methodology

We examine debates about child-focussed matters that take place on a live UK daytime television show using a conversation analytic (CA) approach to undertake close discursive scrutiny of mediated motherhood as it occurs during talk-in-interaction. We begin with a brief introduction to conversation analysis and membership categorisation analysis (MCA) before turning to prior studies of motherhood.

CA and MCA originated in the pioneering work of Sacks (1992) as intertwined branches of the ethnomethodological study of talk-in-interaction. Historically, CA has encountered challenges regarding its compatibility with feminist research (see Kitzinger, 2000; Stokoe & Smithson, 2001). Kitzinger (2000) tackles these concerns head on, arguing that whilst not well suited to essentialist feminist research, CA is entirely well suited to “social constructionist, postmodern and queer theories which treat gender and sexuality as accomplishments rather than pre-given categories” (p. 170). Using examples of her own research, Kitzinger (2000) demonstrates CA to be a valuable means for “understanding how, in our ordinary, mundane interactions, we produce the social order we inhabit—in other words, how we ‘do’ power and powerlessness, oppression and resistance” (p. 174). Our own engagement with CA aligns with the vision set out by Kitzinger (2000), as we seek to show how neoliberal intensive motherhood is routinely (re)produced, negotiated, and, on occasions, resisted during what often appears as seemingly mundane chat on daytime television.

Categories and the moral order

In his now seminal 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. The deployment of categories in talk not only invites us to pair certain members or categories (i.e., mommy and baby), but 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” propounds that there are a host of rights, obligations, and knowledge mundanely inferred by and bound up with membership categories (Hester, 1998; 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’s 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, 2003a) 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." Thus, analysis of membership categories that are invoked and relied upon during debates where motherhood is central permits an exploration of how power is realised in the minutiae of talk, and how members (re)produce, resist, and/or become oppressed in the mundane *doing* of mediated motherhood.

Studies of motherhood: Constructing the "good," the "bad," and the "expert"

Given the vast feminist literature on motherhood, we concentrate our review toward studies that align with the ethnomethodological approach of CA/MCA, applying either a mid-level discursive psychology lens or a more micro CA/MCA lens to examine mediated motherhood. Prior CA/MCA research speaks to our interest in motherhood from differing vantages and includes studies where motherhood identity is the focal interest, as well as studies that take a broader interest in gender. Stokoe's (2003b) 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, 2003b, p. 325). Interestingly, the category "good mother" is not only invoked by members who claim category incumbency, Stokoe (2003b) 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 that are not aligned with the category, then a category puzzle emerges. This invites alternative membership categorisations, including potential categorisation as a "bad mother." Stokoe's (2003b) 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 the mother of a child diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Austin and Fitzgerald (2007) consider category resistance, exploring how the mother preempts 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.

Flinkfeldt's (2017) study of work-based sick leave meetings in Sweden reveals motherhood as an interactional resource with variable outcomes. On some occasions, mundane notions of good motherhood (e.g., putting children first) provide 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.

Mackenzie's (2017, 2018, 2019) feminist poststructuralist studies of Mumsnet discourse highlight a significant child-centric narrative and the routine enactment of gendered parenthood, producing "feminine mothers and, by extension, masculine fathers" (2017, p. 305). Mackenzie (2018) reflects that, whilst some subversion of traditional motherhood narratives does occur in these digital environments, it remains difficult for members to move beyond the normatively gendered boundaries of motherhood whilst maintaining their status as good mother. Similarly, Capdevila et al. (2022) highlight that whilst digital environments create novel spaces for mothering to be enacted, the discourses that abound are often founded in normative notions of good motherhood.

Alongside Mackenzie (2017, 2018, 2019), contemporary motherhood studies feature a growing body of interdisciplinary work that variously explores how members go about the business of doing motherhood in digital environments, including open-forum sites such as Mumsnet (Kinloch & Jaworska, 2021; Pedersen, 2016), Instagram and Twitter (Astudillo-Mendoza & Cifuentes-Zunino, 2022; Capdevila et al., 2022), 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's (2020) analysis of a parenting group's interactions on the instant messaging platform WhatsApp reveals how parental "expertise" merges experiential expertise with information sourced from more traditional expert sources. 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. In Astudillo-Mendoza and Cifuentes-Zunino's (2022) analysis of a Chilean motherhood account on Instagram, they highlight that even when contributors seek to subvert intensive motherhood, they can paradoxically rely upon narratives of expertise and thereby promote the technification of good motherhood. Elsewhere, Zaslow's (2012) exploration of mothers' discussions in online health communities reveals members' strong commitment to the value of experiential and instinctive knowledge. Lastly, Holland (2019) examines lesbian couples' online journals detailing interactions with professional medical expertise around reproductive health and transitions to parenthood. Holland (2019) highlights that lesbian mothers occupy a marginal mainstream identity in which they are "celebrated for their motherhood yet oppressed for their non-heterosexuality" (p. 55). Examining their interactions with medical authority, Holland (2019) reveals the emergence of "(experiential) queer-mother knowledge" (p. 60), which balances medical expertise with trusted queer women's communal knowledge, forging a new and differentiated motherhood identity.

In sum, this prior literature emphasises two interrelated features of mediated 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 that provides interactional and rhetorical resources for

members. Whilst there is always scope to construct and do motherhood differently, when 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 how members develop and engage motherhood identity during child-focussed debates on a popular UK television chat show. Specifically, we consider how speakers work up motherhood expertise, how they navigate and/or reproduce good motherhood, and how they construct and manage potentially accountable matters.

Data and procedure

Our data are drawn from *This Morning*, a popular free-to-air, live, UK television daily broadcast show aimed at a daytime audience. Following McRobbie (2013), these daytime television talk shows, routinely targeted at women, present active sites of mediated motherhood. Moreover, Livingstone and Lunt (1994) suggest that television talk shows are commonly aimed at an “everyday” audience, hence discourses of real-life experience are prioritised. Given our interest in the exploration of everyday motherhood in live interaction, daytime television talk shows present opportunities for fruitful investigation.

This Morning dedicates a daily slot to debate a predetermined current affairs topic for discussion with invited guests. We collected 43 debates from broadcasts that aired between February 2016 and March 2019. All debates were publicly available via YouTube at the point of collection. Our inclusion criteria solely required that debates concerned 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 18 debates for analysis. In 11 of these debates, motherhood is explicitly marked, either by participants being categorised by other speakers or by 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 6 minutes. 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 18 debates and contributed to the detailed analysis of the selected extracts and jointly collaborated in the write-up.

Analysis

Mother-cum-experts

In our data, motherhood identity is often treated as the basis for a speaker’s contribution, and experience as a mother is deemed to provide sufficient topic-relevant expertise to be

heard on a whole host of matters (for discussion of topic relevance, see Fitzgerald & Housley, 2002). As mothers engage in these debates, they undertake mundane discursive manoeuvres that qualify and, indeed, quantify their credentials as experts. In the following extracts, we examine one manoeuvre that features prominently in our data. We refer to it as the “how many–how old” manoeuvre.

Extract 1

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 know- i- i've got three daughters↓
6. .hh and i know that [.hh £before a child goes
7. Eamonn: [uhuh
8. Rachel: up [they do sometimes go out a little bit£
9. Eamonn: [yeah

Extract 2

- 1 Clare: well uh- (.) my children just to gain a bit
- 2 of perspective here are twenty (.) nineteen (.)
- 3 sixteen- ahh nearly sixteen and fourteen
- 4 (0.2) so i have four uh =
- 5 Roch: = £so y- so you're through it no(hh)w↑£

In Extract 1, guest Rachel is in conversation with hosts Ruth and Eamonn. 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 know- i- i've got three daughters,” before returning to her wider stance. In Extract 2, we see how information regarding “how many” children is conjoined with “how old” as guest Clare lists her children's ages (Lines 2–3) before confirming how many children she has (Line 4). As with Rachel in Extract 1, the “how many–how old” manoeuvre underscores Claire's experiential expertise, and her interactional achievement is indicated as host Rochelle infers a success story, whereby Clare is “through it now” (Line 5).

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 makeup to school, host Eamonn interjects and invites a contribution from guest Christine.

Extract 3

1. Eamonn: and here's- here- hh from the headmistress'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 it's 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 nineteen fifteen <we've had acne
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 3, Eamonn requests that Christine provide “the headmistress’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 6–9). She then offers alignment with her coincumbent 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. In asserting “we’ve had to deal with it as a family as well as a school” (Lines 12–13), first-person plural pronouns invoke both Family and School membership categorisation devices, 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.

By the common-sense inference that a mother’s job is to raise her children (Mackenzie, 2018), this prefacing manoeuvre serves as a means by which members both construct and position themselves within an emergent category of Mother-cum-Expert. In our data, speakers’ use of the “how many–how old” manoeuvre is widespread. Across the 18 debates analysed, it is used on 10 occasions by participants evidencing their own credentials, and a further six times by hosts to credential participants. This tendency toward quantifying motherhood sanctions and elevates mothers’ rights to be heard on a host of child-focussed matters, and whilst initially this might be suggestive of an empowered maternal identity, such power is perhaps best understood as a reflection of the neo-liberal parameters of postfeminism. Firstly, it invites a competitive hierarchy amongst women, which, as we will see as our analysis progresses, potentially diminishes the rights of women who don’t have children to be heard on child-focussed matters in these daytime television debates. In contrast, the opinions of mothers with multiple children carry increased rhetorical sway. Secondly, it centres motherhood as the domain of these women’s expertise and capabilities, elevating them as the managers of growth spurts, makeup, and school affairs. As our analysis progresses, we will see further demonstrations of the Mother-cum-Expert in action.

Doing it “right”: Motherhood as moral business

We now turn to the interactional work of Mother-cum-Experts as they (re)produce, resist, and, on occasion, fall foul of the norms of good motherhood. We place our focus on

moments of disagreement between speakers as particularly fertile ground for members' moral work.

Extract 4 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 4

1. Lizz: = that's where there are- that's whe:re y- become
2. [a problem
3. Anna: [but there's- i have [four children-
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, seeking to use her "how many-how old" credentials to shore up her argument (Line 3). However, Lizzie does not cede, instead, her overlapping talk (Line 4) moves to undermine Anna's credibility, questioning Anna's credentials as a good mother by querying the level of openness in Anna's relationship with her children (Lines 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 locally 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 with Phil (the host) leaving children alone in cars.

Extract 5

1. Shona: i:t's (.) a constantly evolving situation as
2. a parent =
3. Phil: = do you agree 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 choke you can throw up
7. .hhh y'know in less than a minute that baby
8. could have been dead in the car

Responding to Shona's flexible 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), rendering Shona’s argument untenable and Shona’s status as a good mother in need of urgent attention.

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 6 was previously introduced in Extract 2, where we witnessed Clare engage the “how many–how old” manoeuvre as she developed her identity as a “busy mum.” The following extract is taken from later in the debate, where Clare is engaged in topic-relevant discussion about children’s eating with expert Hala.

Extract 6

1. Hala: and i see that as an eating disorder
2. [speciali: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 [banquet (.) what
6. Hala: [well-
7. Clare: you would do is you’d have portion 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 6, 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 7

1. Richard: it’s often not the role of the parent to be the
2. one there to na:g .hhh and the- when i go in to
3. advise parents how to- (.) to coach them how to
4. help their- their children =
5. Ruth: = but you have to be the one to na:g Richard (.)
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 every evening
 9. >i say to my son< .hh have you got any homework↑

In Extract 7, 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 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 relocating from other host-assigned topic-relevant membership categories before making their substantive contribution in these debates. In these child-focussed contexts, a category of Mother-cum-Expert emerges with significant interactional benefits, and when Mother-cum-Experts embrace the postfeminist norms of intensive “good mothering,” members’ category rights become further emboldened. They enjoy a significant moral capacity to elevate their own position whilst resisting, demoting, or rejecting the arguments of those who reside outside of the category, including topic-relevant Experts.

Motherhood and the status quo

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 patriarchy, heteronormativity, and/or cisnormativity. We describe these as the “barbed edges of motherhood.”

In the following debate, guest Alice has been introduced as an environmental activist and has shared her concerns about future sustainability. It is against this backdrop that she engages in a debate about opting out of motherhood and we see her working up her status as a “potential Mother.”

Extract 8

- 1 Alice: and with having family as well it’s .hhh
 2 th(h)at’s £what most of us want ri:ght↑£ and
 3 you know >me and my partner< i’m twenty five
 4 he’s just about to turn thi:rtý we’ve got our
 5 £own flat (h) you know it’s- this is the£
 6 time of life£ 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:rtly” (Lines 3–4) and “we’ve got our £own flat” (Lines 4–5). Fulfilling a host of normative criteria: being in a heterosexual relationship, a certain age bracket, and having appropriate resources and stability, Alice constructs her reproductive choices both as a moral dilemma and an accountable matter. Thus, whilst making an autonomous agentic decision to *not* become a mother, Alice simultaneously upholds 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.” Drawing on McRobbie’s (2015) theorising of the perfect, where women aspire to “have it all,” Alice’s display of lament could be read as flowing from her recognition that in rejecting maternal identity she is rejecting the good life, and thus laying vulnerable her identity as a “good woman.”

Our remaining extracts further explore the barbed 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 seemingly present a threat to it in the eyes of their interlocutors.

In Extract 9, the guests are Ally, who has been categorised as a Mother-cum-Expert, and Hol, who is categorised as intentionally childless.

Extract 9

1. Ally: but (.) you’ve chosen (.) NOT to have children
2. Hol: yeah
3. Ally: and i respect that decision .hh but i think you
4. will regre::t that far- further down the track .hh
5. [>what happens < if you
6. Hol: [we::ll (.) i (.) definitely won’t but-
7. Ally: mEET somebody- well >i’m just saying < what happens
8. if you DO meet somebody↑ who desperately 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 Hol out as an intentionally childless, which Hol accepts (Line 2). Ally offers the clichéd assertion that she “respects” Hol’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 & Lindström, 1998, p. 398), that Hol will “regret” her choice (Line 4). Hol interrupts and attempts to reject Ally’s argument (Line 6), stating “i (.) definitely 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 membership pairing 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 Hol and Ally continues in Extract 10.

Extract 10

1. Hol: in what way do:es changing nappies translate to:
2. (.) running a boardroom↑ exactly
3. Ally: if you can change a nappy (0.4) you can change the
4. world
5. Hol: well i can change nappies and i don't have a
6. child so:↑

Here, Hol 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, Hol 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 resisted 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. The speakers are guests Paris and Angela.

Extract 11

1. Angela: .hh you know as parents 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. parent you know > you might not appreciate <
8. .hh [this is- this is how it fee:ls .hh
9. Paris: [((rolls eyes))

Angela positions herself within a category of “parents” (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 disdain for Angela's position with laughter (Lines 3, 5). Angela retaliates with an "us and them" contrast device (Housley & Fitzgerald, 2009), echoing her phrase "as a parent" (Line 7), followed with the accusatory address "you might not appreciate" (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 that 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 & Fitzgerald, 2009, p. 352).

Guest Paris, a transgender woman, is a 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 that not only discounts Paris's 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's 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 generated via the use of "us and them" discourse at a mundane 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 that reveals motherhood as a moral category (e.g., Austin & Fitzgerald, 2007; Flinkfeldt, 2017; Stokoe, 2003b), and one that is vested with expertise (e.g., Hanell & Salö, 2017; Holland, 2019; Mackenzie & Zhao, 2021). Our analysis offers further insight into 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" manoeuvre. We suggest that quantifying the number and age of children serves as a powerful rhetorical mechanism that 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-focussed identities.

Across our data, members consistently foreground their arguments with assertions of their motherhood identity and, thus, their claim to expertise on child-focussed 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-focussed contexts, significant interactional power is typically wielded by professional experts during debates with lay speakers (cf. Kilby & Horowitz, 2013).

Critically, however, it is also clear in our data that the interactional power afforded to women who can lay claim to identity as a mother appears contingent upon upholding the neoliberal ideals of intensive, good mothering that, in these debates, include managing children's homework, overseeing children's sensible and healthy eating, and advising on appropriate makeup use. In contrast, when mothers seek to explore or understand behaviours that do not align with good motherhood, such as leaving children unattended, their expertise is undone on moral grounds and their power is diminished.

Lastly, in our analysis, we see that the construction of motherhood routinely relies upon and (re)produces patriarchal, heteronormative, cisgendered norms. This differs somewhat from the findings of Mackenzie's (2018) analysis of Mumsnet discourse that identify a 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 & Lunt, 1994; Ohara & Saft, 2003). In contrast, as Mackenzie (2018) notes, Mumsnet users are likely to be working mothers. Whilst we don't have any demographic data on the women who participated in the debates we analysed, what we want to emphasise is that the talk we analysed was oriented towards a predominantly female stay-at-home audience. Thus, the (re)production and wholesale communication of good motherhood through the medium of daytime television shows both speaks to a captive female audience and potentially also works to keep its audience captive to patriarchal gendered norms.

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" (for discussion of the complexities experienced by women who chose not to have children, see Wager, 2000).

Our analysis also demonstrates how biological essentialist constructions of motherhood are wielded in a manner that preemptively denies some women possible category membership. We present one such occasion that reveals how a trans woman is excluded from possible motherhood category incumbency, before her nonmembership is then used to negate the argument she seeks to make. Research on parenting experiences of trans women and men remains in its infancy (but 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.

McRobbie (2015) describes the relentless drivers to compete and to self-regulate as “forms of violence, and also an anti-feminism masked by meritocratic ideals which reflect the new practices of gendered governmentality” (p. 17). We echo this, suggesting that there is power in motherhood inasmuch as it vests *some* women with elevated rights to be heard on *some* matters. However, the contemporary neoliberal concept of motherhood, at least as it plays out in these popularised, mainstream contexts, nevertheless serves to reinforce essentialised notions of gender and neoliberal ideals of the good life that ultimately oppress *all* women.

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Appendix

The transcription conventions used are a simplified version of the notation system developed by Jefferson (2004).

(.)	Pause under 0.2 seconds.
(0.3)	Timed pause.
[word]	Overlapping speech.
[word]	
>word<	Speech at a faster pace than surrounding speech by the same speaker.
<word>	Speech at a slower pace than surrounding speech by the same speaker.
(word)	Attempt at interpreting inaudible speech.
()	Inaudible speech with no attempt to interpret.
((sniff))	Information for which no transcription symbol is available.
word	Speech that is emphasised.
WORD	Speech that is further emphasised—much louder than surrounding speech by the same speaker.
↑	Intonation rise.
↓	Intonation fall.
wo(h)rd	Laughter within speech.
=	Latched speech.
wo::rd	Sound before colons is elongated.
°word°	Speech that is distinctly quieter than surrounding speech by the same speaker.
word-	Cut-off speech.
.hhh	In-breath. Three letters indicates normal duration.
hhh	Out-breath. Three letters indicates normal duration.
wohrd	Aspiration/breathiness within a word.
£word£	Smiling voice.
~word~	Shaky voice.
