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Troubling gender norms on Mumsnet: Working from home and parenting during the UK's first COVID lockdown

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Abstract

This article examines the troubling of gender norms that unfolded on the social networking site, Mumsnet, at the beginning of the UK's first lockdown response to the COVID pandemic. Using an analysis of 7144 contributions which included the acronym 'WFH' (=working from home), posted from March 1, 2020 to April 5, 2020, the article examines how Mumsnet members talked about working from home while caring for toddlers and home-schooled children. Mumsnet discussions about everyday moral dilemmas create a discursive space for examining the situated rationalities and normative judgments that shape expectations of how to behave as a working parent. Drawing on post-structuralist discourse theory, the article shows how Mumsnet contributors generated alternative sub-categorizations of 'good mums', and destabilized discourse assumptions of intensive motherhood, such as always 'being there' for their children, thereby 'working the weakness in the norms' (Butler, 1993) and creating potential for change.

KEYWORDS
discourse analysis, gender norms, intensive mothering, mumsnet, WFH

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Crisis events, particularly those demanding extraordinary responses and affecting entire communities, have the potential to disrupt normative assumptions about social roles and relations. Individuals may act in ways that appear to flout established norms of behavior, and may rationalize their actions in ways that facilitate institutional change by contesting dominant discourses (Fairclough, 1992; Townley, 2008). This article examines one area of disruption generated by the COVID pandemic crisis, in relation to gendered norms about working parents. In the UK context, the disruption to everyday life intensified from March 23, 2020, when the UK government required citizens to work-from-home where possible, instigating the country's first COVID lockdown. Many workers were parents without their usual access to childcare facilities because of nursery or school closures, who therefore found themselves simultaneously juggling caring and working roles at home (Office for National Statistics 'ONS', 2020b). Working parents struggled to pursue both roles equally well, and domestic routines in many families were fractured.

Crisis disruptions such as pandemics and economic shocks have varied effects across households and society. They can precipitate changes in gender norms and social relations, including work-life practices. Although it is possible, as identified by Chung and van der Lippe (2020; see also Lott & Chung, 2016; Sullivan & Lewis, 2001), that working-from-home might have the effect of *reinforcing* existing gender roles, in this article, we explore an alternative possibility: that in a novel situation in which day-to-day practices of working and family-care are disrupted, a discursive space might emerge in which gendered assumptions are more apparent and open for discussion and questioning. Scholarship on the consequences of work visibility (DeVault, 2014; Hatton, 2017) suggests that dual caring-and-working at home—in sight of all family members—might foster a different sharing of domestic responsibilities and new formulations of mothering/parenting, than took place pre-pandemic. Erstwhile, office workers might come to see partners enacting their paid-work role, and not just performing their role as family/household members. The usual 'gendered dichotomies between family and career' (Schnurr et al., 2019, p. 416) might be amenable to questioning if domestic and paid work are no longer physically separated. Furthermore, while the desire to be a 'good parent' or 'committed worker' is likely to continue to engage parents' concerns, the radically changed situational context might give parents space to 'try on' (Williams, 2002) alternative ways of enacting and doing parenthood, with consequent performative effects on constructions of mothering/parenting. This may diminish the performative power of conventional discourses such as 'intensive mothering' (Ennis, 2014; Wall, 2010; see also Butler, 1990, 1993 on performativity).

This article focuses on the early period of the COVID pandemic. From early March 2020, online platforms such as *Mumsnet*, *Urban.75*, and *Quora* erupted with questions from individuals about working-from-home, home-schooling, and how to manage the novel situation. The article examines the early disruption by exploring online discussions in the five weeks from March 1, 2020 to April 5, 2020 through the data lens of *Mumsnet Talk*. Established in 2000, Mumsnet has since become the UK's main discussion platform for parents. It is conventionally associated with the voice of mothers who are typically white, middle-class, and working, which was the dominant demographic in Mumsnet's 2009 survey (Pedersen, 2016); however, the membership profile may have since broadened. Discussions on *Mumsnet Talk* are anonymous, sometimes heated, and typically include one original post (the 'OP'), many responses, and several interweaving conversations as members respond to the OP or to each other's comments, often signaling the interlocutor with the '@' symbol + username. This article develops the argument that anonymous social networking sites (SNS) such as Mumsnet provide an important space in which community members can be subversive by 'working the weakness in the norm' (Butler, 1993, p. 237) when talking about everyday moral dilemmas and the situated rationalities and normative judgments that shape expectations of how to behave as a working parent. Specifically, I contend that in the early period of the pandemic, Mumsnet provided a vibrant discursive space to trouble social norms about how a good [and often working] mother should behave.

The article proceeds by outlining the context for this research, the theoretical framing, and scholarship on discourses of parenthood. The research study and methodology are then introduced, drawing on debates about the value and meaning of publicly visible but anonymous conversations on SNSs. This is followed by a presentation and

discussion of themes arising from the analysis of the Mumsnet dataset. Finally, implications for debates about the subversion of gender norms and social change are discussed.

2 | CONTEXT

In the UK, an enforced lockdown began immediately after the Prime Minister's announcement on March 23, 2020, that all workers must work from home (WFH) where possible.[1] This announcement followed the *advisory* messages to WFH on 12 and 16 March, which seemed ambivalent to some firms, with the result that few workers stayed at home that week. However, in the following month, 47% of employed people did some work at home, with most (86%) giving the pandemic as the reason (ONS, July 2020a). In the reference week during which the ONS conducted its first study (in April 2020), there was little difference between the percentage of employed men and women WFH (47.5% for men; 45.7% for women). Some workers were furloughed and staying at home; key workers whose jobs required an outside presence—for example, at food-processing factories, providing health-care in hospitals, and collecting refuse—continued to work but using PPE[2] and following risk-mitigation protocols.

Many people, together with their family and household units, had to confront a fundamentally changed domestic situation and negotiate ways to adapt to it. Parents (working or not) faced the added complication of home-schooling children and/or caring for younger children, since schools and daytime nurseries were closed except for key workers on March 20, 2020. Workers had new demands on their time, while also competing with other household members for physical space and Internet bandwidth. In the early months, it quickly became apparent that working women, in particular, experienced the pressure of an expanded 'second shift' (Hochschild & Machung, 2012), often strug-gling with domestic distractions while trying to work in the same home. Women were undertaking an average of two-thirds more of the daily childcare duties than men—about 3.15 h compared with 2 h for men (ONS, July 2020b).

As an illustrative case context, the COVID pandemic can generate insights not only about how workers adapt to novel working arrangements but also about how parenting identities are reproduced and/or renegotiated. Exogenous crises have the potential to destabilize institutionalized norms because they call into question how to 'read' and define the situation (Goffman, 1974), and how to interpret the 'rules of the game' (North, 1990). Crises potentially create 'moments of degrounding when we're standing in two different places at once' (Butler, 1994, p. 38)—such as mother and worker—and so the norms around both positions are more open to question. The next section describes how those processes are theorized in this article.

3 | THEORETICAL FRAMING

This research is guided by a commitment to post-structuralist discourse theory and to ongoing debates about gender and parenthood. Central to this theoretical perspective is an interest in discourses, defined by Foucault (1972, p. 49) as '[not just] signs to designate things … [but also] practices which systematically form the objects of which they speak'. At any particular cultural-historical moment, an event, role-category (such as worker or mother), or social insti-tution (such as family) is surrounded by a discursive space with multiple and potentially competing discourses, each with 'a different story to tell' (Burr, 2003, p. 64) and a different way to represent and talk about the topic (Hall, 1997). Competing discourses may provide different subject positions,[3] each with associated norms and expectations that encourage particular ways to know, talk, and make moral judgments (Davies & Harré, 1990), for example, about being an 'enterprising worker' (Grey, 1994) within a discourse of neoliberal capitalism. Discourses vie with each other for legitimacy because there is no essentialist reference point against which to fix meaning in a realist sense (Derrida, 1987), and therefore no barometer to determine whether extant social norms or expectations are 'correct'.

Although always-competing, some discourses are more dominant and difficult to resist because the ration-ality and principles that underpin them seem irrefutable (Townley, 2008). One example is the enduring power

of neoliberal discourse, with its appealing principle of 'the free exercise of personal choice' (Rose, 1999, p. 230). Dominant discourses tend to be supported by strong governance practices operating within family, organizations, labor markets, and similar domains (Walters, 2012, p. 11), whose effects are to construct subject positions, normalize particular behaviors, and encourage self-evaluation and self-disciplining (Foucault, 1994(1978), p. 248). Classic examples of such governance practices include the Catholic confessional (Foucault, 1977, p. 27) and employee performance appraisal systems (Townley, 1994). In this article, I will argue that the crowdsourced commentary by contributors to SNS such as Mumsnet operate as a form of governance practice—for example, by naming/categorizing types of parents, evaluating each other's behavior, and shaming 'deviance'—while also *destabilizing* gender norms by describing, naming, and justifying new ways to be working mothers.

Discourse instability is more likely during periods of crisis and disruption when values and priorities are re-examined, and when the rationalities that sustain a discourse are likely to be more amenable to challenge. Such instability potentially creates a space for variations to emerge and be named, creating the possibility that new subject positions can also be taken up by others (e.g., see Gill, 2003, on the emergence of 'new man' and 'new lad' in the 1980s and 1990s). However, the possibilities for destabilizing dominant discourses, such as the 'good mother' are constrained by the performative weight of convention about how good mothers have acted in the past. Here, the scholarship of Judith Butler on the performativity of gender offers theoretical insight. Butler has argued that 'the very injunction to be a given gender takes place through discursive routes [such as] to be a good mother' (1990, p. 199), and that the repeated enactment of social/gender norms is performative in the sense that the enactment brings into being the actuality of the norm (Butler, 1990, 1993). Norms (e.g., about being a woman) can be challenged through the repetition of *alternative* performative acts, but if a woman wants to be recognized as such by others, her performance must operate within certain parameters: 'it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible' (Butler, 1990, p. 199, emphasis in original). Similarly, if an individual wants to enact an *alternative* performance as a 'good mother' (and yet still be recognized by others as legitimately occupying that position), this calls for an alternative rationality and/or alternative categorizations that resonate with convention. Thus, the subversion of norms requires a repetition, which is also a *displacement* 'through hyperbole, dissonance, internal confusion, and proliferation [of] the very constructs by which [norms] are mobilized' (Butler, 1990, p. 43). Furthermore, if we follow the logic of Goffman on framing (e.g., Goffman, 1974), the local situation itself might be redefined and re-framed as part of an argument through which an individual claims to 'still be' accountable to the good mother discourse even though acting in a way which superficially seems discordant (see also Brickell, 2005, on subversion of masculinities; and Tyler, 2020, pp. 46–51 on subversion).

4 | DISCOURSES OF WORKING PARENTHOOD

This section of the article discusses parenting and working discourses already in circulation when the COVID pandemic began. Societal discourse is a complex space formed from 'different discourses [which] are intimately entangled with each other' (Jager & Maier, 2009, p. 35). These discourses have varying normative effects depending on how individuals identify and interpret the local situational frame (Goffman, 1974), who the assumed audience is, and how they position themselves within the discourses applicable in that situation (Davies & Harré, 1990). Discourses may therefore extend their power across multiple spaces. For example, although parenting discourses of the 'good mother'/'involved father' (Miller, 2017) or the 'bad mum' (Jaworska, 2017) may have more resonance inside the domestic sphere of the home, they may also operate 'in the office' for working parents who feel guilty about time away from family, leading them to avoid the 'career track' (Aarntzen et al., 2021). One of the consequences of the COVID lockdown was to disrupt the physical and temporal boundaries between parenting and working, since many adults found themselves combining all activities—working, parenting, home-schooling, house/garden management, and so on—in one location. Activities that were formerly out-of-sight and off-site to household members were now visible. This visibility shift is important because the extent to which work is visible or constructed as 'noticeable' has

been identified as a core dimension driving the way society values work and the people who do it (Daniels, 1987; DeVault, 2014; Hatton, 2017).

It is possible that the conflation of usually separated activities, compounded by the absence of transitional devices such as work-to-home commuting, had the potential to destabilize discourses about working parents. For example, parents may have contested worker/parent norms by exploring and 'trying on' (Williams, 2002) alternative ways of enacting those positions, and rationalizing those changes in online conversations with the effect of troubling gender norms.

Gendered debates about parenting traditionally revolve around whether women are naturally and biologically predisposed to being the primary carer or whether caring is a culturally learned skill developed through the practice and experience of *doing* the primary caring (e.g., Gilligan, 1982). Discourses that position mothers as the ideal parent tend to rely on 'natural carer' assumptions that privilege the notion of the mother-child bond (Held, 2006). Good mothers see their children as 'marvelous', and take pride in their achievements (Coates, 1997). They are child-centered and focused on their child's development, devoting time and resources to providing enriching activities and environments. The discourse of intensive motherhood (Lowe, 2016; Miller, 2007; Wall, 2010, 2013) positions a mother as a person who should acquire expertise in child development and take responsibility for strategically planning for their child's growth and future success. For example, in Takseva's study (2014), good mothers were expected to pay for activities such as ballet classes and French-immersion camps, thereby presenting their children as more accomplished than others (and so more eligible for good schools). The pressure for working mothers to 'be there' for their children can translate into what Edgley (2021) has called 'maternal presenteeism'.

Miller (2017) argues that expectations of parents have intensified in recent years, and that fathers are more involved now than in previous decades. However, interview-based research (e.g., Miller, 2017) as well as analysis of parenting magazines (e.g., Sunderland, 2004) suggests that the dominant parenting discourse positions mothers as *primary* carers. Fathers are typically the part-time 'helpers' who are able to do more of the 'fun stuff' (Crompton & Lyonette, 2008; Ehrstein, 2022) with their children while mothers take on the '24/7 thinking responsibility' for managing arrangements (Miller, 2017, p. 4). The mental load on mothers extends to situations such as organizing child-care support and trouble-shooting unexpected problems, even when both parents are doing paid work outside the home.

Contemporary parenting is often combined with paid work. Women's participation in the labor market is the norm rather than the exception, and most families in the UK are working families, often with one full-time and one part-time wage earner (Connolly et al., 2016: 838). This means that parents are likely to position themselves not only in relation to parental discourses but also to discourses about paid work. Employment discourses arguably inhabit a wider discursive space than parenting, especially given the diversity of types of employment. Two discourses relevant to working parents are 'employability' and the 'enterprising self'. Both discourses are embedded in a wider neoliberal discourse that celebrates choice, individual responsibility, and competition. Typically, being employable is constructed as not only having specific skills, but having the 'capacity … to adapt to the demands of employment' (Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004, p. 8) and an entrepreneurial approach to self-development that demonstrates attitudes such as initiative, availability, and commitment (Grey, 1994; Grazier, 1999; Handley, 2018; McQuaid & Lindsay, 2005).

Wall argues that the convergence of the discourses of intensive child-centered mothering and neoliberal self-responsibility (being an economically-productive worker) is likely to 'open up *less* rather than *more* space for women's equality in the workplace and family' (2013, p. 170, emphasis added). The expectation that women will devote themselves to their children's development as well as their employers' demands may create ambivalence or anxiety if neither responsibility can be satisfactorily accomplished (see Ennis, 2014, p. 333). That said, situations of tension or ambiguity may open up a discursive space to contest the subject positions of good mother/father or ideal worker, by redefining the situational frame (Goffman, 1974), and describing and justifying alternative ways to be good working parents.

5 | RESEARCH DESIGN

The study's focus was on how Mumsnet contributors talked about their domestic, parenting, and work-related responsibilities in the period from 1 March to April 5, 2020, and how they reproduced or troubled the priorities and normative assumptions associated with discourses of being a good working parent.

Mumsnet was selected as the data source because it is a well-known and widely used SNS for UK parents, and it quickly became a platform for conversations to discuss the implications of COVID. In contrast to platforms such as Twitter, where users tend to cultivate a public profile, Mumsnet operates as an anonymous space. Users choose an idiosyncratic pseudonym and take great care not to reveal identifying situational information, even if this might help tailor the giving/receiving of advice. This provides what Mackenzie calls a 'double layer of anonymity' (2017, p. 309), which arguably facilitates participants' self-expression while avoiding the normative judgments of those who would otherwise label them as a particular category of person (Barton & Lee, 2013; Mackenzie, 2019; Turkle, 1995). Mumsnet itself advises users that posts are 'searchable … and legally linkable to and quotable by [anyone]'.[4] The Mumsnet community is not representative of UK parents. A Mumsnet internal survey in 2009 suggested that users then were typically middle-class mothers who also work (Pedersen, 2016). Mumsnet's advertising page states that 75% of users are in full-time or part-time employment, and 78% of users are aged between 26 and 45.[5]

The research design was reviewed and approved by the author's University Research Ethics Committee in June 2021. Data collection involved downloading all 'Talk' threads containing at least one occurrence of the acronym WFH ('working from home'), and posted between 1/3/20 and 5/4/20. The threads were identified using Mumsnet's search tool on https://www.mumsnet.com/Talk and originated from various sub-forums such as 'Work' or 'Coronavirus'. All threads were initially skim-read to check for relevance, and then individually downloaded using the Chrome extension for importing into the proprietary software MAXQDA[6], a software tool widely used for qualitative data analysis. A small proportion was not deemed relevant to the study's focus, amounting to approximately 1-in-20 posts in March and then 1-in-5 in early April. By late March, the acronym 'WFH' was so widespread that its use was sometimes peripheral to a thread's topic, which (after an initial skim-read) was therefore not downloaded. An example of a non-included thread is one that discussed the Swedish government's response to COVID, which had one instance of 'WFH' and did not relate to citizens' actions. In total, 131 threads were downloaded, with 7144 posts. Each had an OP plus a number of responses (mean average posts per thread = 54 posts; median = 28 posts/thread). A sample of original-post titles and the number of posts is shown in Table 1.

Mumsnet posts invite interaction and commentary, for example, by asking a question or seeking advice about a moral dilemma. A common convention is to preface the title of a potentially controversial OP with the acronym AIBU? (= Am I Being Unreasonable?), where the controversy might be about how to handle the situation described in the post. As a platform which thrives on comment, opinion, and judgment, it might initially be assumed that Mumsnet has a normative influence on parents, operating as a governance practice. However, Pedersen (2021, p. 510) has argued that Mumsnet has 'become part of a wider resurgence of women's rights organizations' in recent years. My research sought to examine whether conformist or 'troubling' (Butler, 1990) conversations played out in practice. My particular interest was in the extent to which Mumsnet contributors destabilize social norms in the way they talked about what they could or should do *differently* in situations created by the COVID crisis. As such, I was interested in how situations are described, how subject positions are implied and troubled (Butler, 1990), and how rationalities are constructed to justify one's actions and account for oneself as a subject (e.g., a 'good mother') deserving recognition, approval, or empathy (Townley, 2008). In an anonymous SNS such as Mumsnet, issues, ambiguities, role-tensions, and rationalities are woven together in 'small stories' (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) and 'small confessions' (Jaworska, 2017) communicated by the original poster and those who contribute to the unfolding commentary in that thread.

TABLE 1 Categorization of thread topics, sorted by number of posts within threads

Num. Posts	Num. Threads	Category	Example subject-heading from an Original Post
914	15	WFH + how are you managing?	AIBU to be feeling totally drained by long meetings every morning
853	14	WFH + home-schooling	Kids refusing to do home-learning
826	12	Reflections	Has anyone's life not changed?
576	6	Comments about partners	DH (=darling husband) on furlough but won't help around the house
573	25	WFH + childcare	5 years-old learning and WFH - how do you do it?
563	2	Neighbors	AIBU—neighbor isn't a key worker
483	3	Being a good/bad mum	Is lockdown making anyone a bad mum?
454	3	Finances and political economy	WFH question about expenses
393	2	Food shopping	Tesco rant
313	11	WFH + employer or furlough	How is your employer helping you WFH?
249	4	Mental health	What happens when you can't do it anymore?
171	4	Co-habiting questions	Are couples choosing to co-habit or stay apart?
170	2	Questions about 'going outside'	More people venturing out today?
123	7	WFH tech/physical set-up	Internet access and WFH?
86	7	School closures & key-worker rules	Women refused permission to WFH whilst kids are off school?
48	3	WFH in a busy household	I'm going insane - referee to toddler and 2 workaholics
349	11	Other non-categorized posts (because too few in each category)	
7144	131		

The Mumsnet threads, once imported into MAXQDA, were closely read and often re-read before coding, memo-ing, and interpreting using an approach which drew on post-structuralist discourse analysis (e.g., Graham, 2011; Mackenzie, 2019; Rose, 2007; Sunderland, 2004). Rose (2007) recommends an iterative process which begins with familiarization (looking with fresh eyes), and then moves to multiple readings which facilitate an interpretation of how the words and their structure produce particular 'effects' (p. 161). This entails moving beyond an initial review of the content and linguistic traces of particular discourses, to then consider what is foregrounded and given promi-nence, as well as what is not said but could have been (Sunderland, 2004, p. 32). I was also influenced by the careful and thoughtful account of discourse analysis of *Mumsnet Talk* given in the monograph by Mackenzie (2019). Like Mackenzie, I found that prolonged engagement with Mumsnet conversations helped me to see patterns in style as well as content. Mumsnet posts tend to be individualized, talking about oneself or specific others such as family or other posters, in a communicative style that is pacy, sometimes witty and irreverent, and usually supportive and empathetic. A benefit of social media data is that one can 'go back' in time. Therefore, I began by reading the 131 threads chronologically (from 1 March to April 5, 2020), to re-experience the slow and uncertain unfolding of the pandemic, before re-reading for content and discursive elements.

6 | FINDINGS

6.1 | The range of 'original post' topics

For the 5-week period analyzed for this study, 131 discussion threads were downloaded. As outlined earlier, a small proportion of additional threads were not downloaded after a preliminary skim-read showed that the acronym 'WFH' was used only tangentially as a contextual marker in a discussion not linked to working or childcare.

Table 1 presents a categorization of the topics indicated in the subject line of the OP, which started off the thread. Also shown are the number of threads, the total number of posts in those threads, and illustrative OP subject titles. Table 2 presents the top nine threads in the 131-thread dataset, according to the total number of posts per thread.

6.2 | Am I Being Unreasonable?—Exploring norms and community perspectives

A common format for Mumsnet opening/original posts (OP[7]) is to begin the subject with the acronym, AIBU? (= *Am I Being Unreasonable* …?). Four of the top 9 threads have OP subjects that begin in this way. AIBU posts can be used to vent anger and frustration. Their purpose, more broadly, often seems to be about checking in on the community consensus as a form of norm-seeking. For example, *AIBU−Neighbor isn't a key worker* is a long thread about government announcements concerning key-worker status and whether key-worker children could have a place in nurseries/schools after most closed from March 20, 2020. Although Mumsnet is sometimes seen as an information-sharing platform, the discussions in this thread were only occasionally quoting or providing web-links to government regulations and announcements. In the main, the discussions entailed interpreting those regulations and talking through one's moral responsibility about whether or not to take up a nursery/school place even if technically eligible to do so. These AIBU threads seemed to provide an anonymous space to rehearse one's justifications and rationalities around work decisions and/or childcare arrangements, to hear others' views and circumstantial reasoning, and perhaps to change one's thinking about the *right way* that a parent should behave.

TABLE 2 Top nine threads in the dataset of 131 threads, according to number of posts in each thread

Number of posts in thread	Original Post subject-heading	Category	OP post date
366	AIBU to feel nothing's left for average families?	Food shopping	April 02, 2020
357	Tomorrow - who's going to work, WFH or isolating?	WFH - how are you managing?	March 15, 2020
352	AIBU - neighbor isn't a key worker	Neighbors	April 03, 2020
327	AIBU to think another Great Depression is coming?	Finances and political economy	April 03, 2020
236	Annoyed about mums showing off about kids crafts in lockdown	Being a good/bad mum	April 03, 2020
236	What has this situation taught you?	Reflections	April 03, 2020
220	AIBU to ask how many people are WFH without childcare right now?	WFH + childcare	March 31, 2020
215	Is lockdown making anyone a bad mum?	Being a good/bad mum	April 03, 2020
211	AIBU to be sick of doing neighbor's shopping	Neighbors	April 04, 2020

6.3 | Good mums and bad mums

Another observation from the 'Top 9' threads is the prevalence of discussions around combining WFH and care of now-at-home children. Across the dataset of 131 threads, 25 were categorized as *WFH + childcare*, and 14 as *WFH + home-schooling*. Of particular relevance to this study is the 'bad mum' in post #8, and the implied 'good mum' in post #5 shown in Table 2. Although the binary positions of the good/bad mum are ubiquitous in the Mumsnet threads (see also Mackenzie, 2019; Pedersen, 2016; Pedersen & Lupton, 2018), the meanings behind the labels are not stable, and can potentially be subverted by bringing different situational contexts and rationalities into the discussion space to justify behavior that contravenes norms. Whilst some Mumsnet posts engaged directly with a 'good/bad mum' discourse, others gave moral and emotional support (often in a humorous way) to those anxious about how they were perceived, and in so doing seemed to validate their claims to still be a good mum. The original poster (OP) in top-post #8 (*Is lockdown making anyone a bad mum?*) asks Mumsnet if 'anyone else' shares her frustration as a usually-tolerant mum who is 'drowning' and feeling 'shouty and snappy'. Responders offered empathetic accounts of their own adaptations, such as '*Does giving DCs unlimited screentime, abandoning bedtimes, and drinking wine in the afternoon count as 'bad mum'? If so, I am too. But I've invented a Tidying-up Olympics, and they enjoy the medals*'. [DC = Darling Children on Mumsnet]. Normative boundaries were thereby tested, and alternative performances offered for community evaluation. In this case, being a non-bad (i.e., still good) mum was presented as playing games or giving permissions for unlimited computer time, without necessarily taking on the 'intensive mothering' of always 'being there' (e.g., see Edgley, 2021; Miller, 2017). The matrix of assumptions surrounding good mothering was thus gently questioned and destabilized.

A point of annoyance in some posts was how Facebook and school WhatsApp groups—which are not anonymous—were sometimes used by parents to upload a stream of attractive photos presenting themselves doing lots of crafting and baking with happy children. Some posters complained of this as 'competitive parenting' from the 'mummy Mafia members', while also highlighting the 'increasing amount of staged stuff on FB[8] and Insta'. Some exhorted the OP to mute the social media streams and to stop comparing themselves: '*you don't need to compare yourself to anyone*'; '*comparisons are never healthy*'; '*appreciate who you are and stop hurting yourself*'. However, social comparison is a feature of everyday life (Festinger, 1954), and Mumsnet thrives on providing a space where contributors can tell or hear tales of everyday dilemmas and the ensuing to-and-fro of moral commentary. In addition to the exhortation to 'avoid comparison', other posts provided counter-narratives. One contributor cautioned against over-generalizing: '*Remember that they might usually be in beetroot-stained PJs[9] watching repeats of Morse*'. Another positioned the OP as a particular type of mum: '*They're not posting to make you feel miserable. Of course not. They have the time, skill and desire to do crafty thing. Some of them are mumsy mums at home fulltime and not just because of COVID*'. This exchange suggests that Mumsnet can open up the discursive space around motherhood, pointing out that mums are in different contexts, and proposing new categories such as 'mumsy mums' and (in other posts) 'super mums' and 'crafty mums'. The implication of this particular extract is that non-crafty mums might not be 'mumsy' but can still be good mums, thereby expanding ways to legitimately claim the position of good mum. Here we see echoes of what Butler called a 'subversive resignification and *proliferation* beyond the binary frame' (1990, p. xxxiv, emphasis added) where the binary in this case is the simplistic good-versus-bad mum.

6.4 | Negotiating responsibilities and sharing advice on working-from-home while caring for children

The majority of threads were extended conversations about how to negotiate and manage the competing demands of working-from-home, childcare, and household responsibilities. While everyone faced a similar COVID/lockdown context, local household situations were varied and the implications even more so. Working parents had different employment arrangements; job-tasks were more-or-less adaptable to the interruptions of children; and each family

and extended-family configuration raised different possibilities and constraints. Workloads varied enormously in the early weeks, with some people 'insanely busy' while others worried about job security because their employers had so few customers and risked bankruptcy. Some talked of being very efficient, attributing it to 'no more coffee chats and social talk'. For others, there were new distractions such as slow Internet speeds, VPN issues, or the hypnotic draw of COVID news bulletins. For many working parents, the main issue was how to combine work commitments with childcare and home-schooling requirements.

6.4.1 | Early advice: Tag-teaming and extending the workday

Early experiences of combining work and childcare responsibilities were often chaotic, with some talking of being in tears, exhausted, or 'at breaking point'. There was also humor, as stories were shared: *'my toddler told everyone on the conference call yesterday that mummy snores and eats cat food (only one of which is true)'*. Many early original posts asked for advice, with questions such as: *WFH teleconference meetings with baby*? (20 posts); *AIBU to ask how many people are WFH with no childcare right now*? (220 posts). Responders talked of testing different arrangements, and of finding new rhythms and routines that worked—at least partially. In households with two WFH parents, a common suggestion was to combine 'tag-teaming' with extending the normal working day. This meant parents adopted a domestic shift pattern, taking turns during the day to care for children and attend to home-schooling whilst the other could focus on their work. Working days might start at 5:30 when children were still sleeping, and parents logged on again at bedtimes. Work stretched over to evenings and weekends. Options available to parents depended on organizational responses, with some employers initially insisting that work could not be combined with childcare, and that in such situations, the worker must take annual leave. Many employers became more flexible after a few weeks. The tag-teaming addressed the immediate issue of supervising children (and was especially important for toddlers), and was a common coping strategy where both parents had previously worked *away* from home.

However, for mothers who already worked at home or part-time, and who usually spent some of the day-time with childcare responsibilities, a different dynamic was discussed. Here, the mother's 'mental load' of what Miller ([2017](#), p. 4) calls '24/7 thinking' about childcare seemed less transferable to the other partner who was now also working from home. This might be because a mental load is invisible, and because it takes time for another to notice and learn how to take that load 'off' the main carer. Mumsnet contributors gave examples: *'last week, DH [=Darling Husband] made himself lunch but didn't ask me or feed the kids. When I went to make the kids lunch, he offered to do it. But he's so used to only doing things for himself that he didn't think …*; Another example is: *'I've ended up doing 90% of the cooking/cleaning. Things only get done by others if I assign tasks and check up on them, but that's a whole other job'*.

These examples suggest that a renegotiation of the domestic (or at least, the childcare) contract was easier when both working parents were previously out-at-work, and where the switch to both working *at home* triggered a discussion of shared coping tactics.

6.4.2 | Expanding rationalities

In many posts, contributors took time to portray the varied and novel situational elements that they were navigating. Setting out these situational elements was a precursor to rationalizing and justifying actions which might ordinarily have positioned them as bad (or at least, not good) working-from-home mums—a positioning they were resisting. Personal stories were told, rather than universalizing statements being made about working parents *in general*. Situational variations included whether or not the house had a garden in which children could play un-supervized (so the parents could do uninterrupted work); whether or not children had special education needs or ADHD[10] and therefore needed closer support (to the 'legitimate' neglect of work); the nature of work tasks such as whether confidential

conference calls about child safeguarding or criminal activity could really be made with an impressionable child in the same room (which justified sending children to the key-worker schools); and many more. In these scenarios, social norms about parenting and working were re-framed by presenting situational elements as novel and therefore demanding novel responses: normal expectations did not apply. This chaotic period of intensively unusual situations where individuals were simultaneously parent-and-worker could be read as a time when 'we're standing in two different places at once' with potential to break through 'to a new set of paradigms' (Butler, 1994, p. 38). Working mothers could be 'good mums' even if not abiding by the 'intensive parenting' discourse.

At other times, advice was given about options for managing such situations. One contributor advised a hassled working parent to '*set manageable and realistic expectations with your work colleagues, for example, set an out-of-office on emails explaining that you'll respond within 4 h, and that if it's urgent then they can phone you*'. This kind of advice can be seen as enabling others to expand their positional repertoires, in order to successfully inhabit the position of good (and working) mother.

Another feature prevalent on Mumsnet was the giving of meta-advice, for example, calling for tolerance if others were shaming a particular contributor for his or her advice or actions. In one thread, about whether one can WFH and simultaneously care for children, some contributions seemed aimed at calming the conversation, for example, '*there are so many variables—how relaxed are your kids? How many other stresses are you managing? How helpful is your boss? As soon as we start with—'well *my* job is so complex and demanding, *I* cannot possibly WFH but you can with your easy job'... well we then have a problem*'. On the other hand, contributors would occasionally call out and question the rationalities proposed by others. In one example, a poster had said that her husband was either on the phone or a Zoom call from 9-5 and '*so is limited in what he can do*' regarding childcare. Other contributors called this out: '*I'm sorry, but that's rubbish. I'm supervising two kids and taking calls; it's not ideal, but is doable. These men boxed up in their home offices because their calls are so important! They can do their turn with the kids as well, like DH and I are managing to do.*'

6.4.3 | Justifying changed priorities

In those overwhelming early days of the pandemic, a common concern was how to juggle and prioritize: '*I can work hard on my business, I can cook nutritious meals from the assorted mix of ingredients we have, I can be a good multi-disciplinary home tutor - but I can't do them all, 100%, at the same time*'. The discourse of 'intensive parenting' seemed difficult to sustain when parents were simultaneously being called on to be good workers, caring neighbors, and homemakers. Priorities were debated and justifications made about decisions and actions. One parent commented on being resigned to having the house in a mess, in order to focus instead on work and home-schooling. In fact, few comments were posted about housework, except by parents with more time (e.g., if furloughed) who talked of being able to 'declutter' home and garden. Instead, most debates were around childcare, home-schooling and work, and how to manage and prioritize these tasks. For example, a lively debate unfolded across many threads about how to home-school. Some schools provided copious worksheets, resources, and activities. Overwhelmed parents wondered how they could complete all of them, as well as meet their work commitments, even if they were 'tag-teaming' with partners. One contributor described having to work solidly to meet employer deadlines, and of feeling guilty '*because the three kids have just dossed about all day*'.

Alongside these anxieties were comments advocating new priorities and justifications; in effect, the comments were re-examining the matrix of assumptions about good parenting. In discussions of home-schooling, while some parents feared that non-compliance would risk their children being 'left behind' educationally, others highlighted the value of enabling stressed children to feel safe at home at an existentially worrying period. In a thread entitled 'Kids refuse to home-learn', a contributor commented '*If shouting and crying is the only way [home-schooling] gets done - when everything's scary and weird anyway - I don't think much learning is going to be happening. We should be concentrating on making the kids feel safe. We know they're not. They don't have to be panicking about their 'phonics' on top of whether they'll ever see Grandma again*'. Some suggested that—given the present context—relaxed play was more

important than complying with home-schooling schedules, and that developing life-skills was more important that school-learning.

Parents with toddlers talked of the difficulty of entertaining them and their demand for constant or regular attention. Tag-teaming was vital for many couples but not an option for all families (such as single-parents). Some contributors offered reassurance that colleagues on Zoom do not mind if a toddler appears on screen—and that signals of 'professionalism' were changing. However, some doubted that colleagues without children would be persuaded of this norm-shift. Others added that some jobs are not amenable to frequent disruptions, and gave examples such as precision/time-critical software coding to restore IT services. The extensively varied nature of Mumsnet contributors' jobs again came into the foreground, and again these conversations seemed to provide discursive resources to justify a range of responses to the disruptive situation, as contributors sought to justify their actions as being those of a good parent and worker.

7 | DISCUSSION

This article has examined ways in which the contributors to the anonymous social network site, Mumsnet, responded to the emerging COVID crisis in the five weeks from March 1, 2020 until April 5, 2020, through an analysis of 131 Mumsnet threads that included the acronym WFH ('working from home'). A particular interest was how, and to what extent, the conversations destabilized and 'troubled' (Butler, 1990) social norms about how working parents should behave, in a context of circulating discourses about intensive parenting, the good/bad mother, and the enterprising worker (Grey, 1994; Lowe, 2016; Mackenzie, 2019; Miller, 2007, 2017).

The data suggests that forums such as Mumsnet provide an important platform from which community members can engage in norm-seeking, norm-forming, and norm-troubling conversations, as they explore expectations and judgments about what is appropriate behavior for role-categories they identify with. In the dataset collected for this study, Mumsnet conversations did not explicitly contest social expectations that mothers should be 'good'. Instead the discursive impact of the conversations was more subtle, and arguably more powerful and potentially destabilizing. This is because conversational threads implicitly queried the *rationalities* that sustain evaluations of what 'good' mothers or working parents actually do and should do. An example given earlier is the Mumsnet thread, '*Annoyed about mums showing off about kids crafts in lockdown*', in which the OP and others expressed irritation with parents on Facebook who post joyous photos of crafting-and-baking with children; in this long thread, several counter-narratives were offered for why the 'mumsy mums' depicted in the photos are not the only way to be 'good' mums. The label mumsy mums can be seen as an example of 'proliferation beyond the binary frame' (Butler, 1990, p. xxxiv), a way to extend understandings of the variety of ways that mothering can legitimately be done—especially by working parents. Mothers are not simply good or bad; there are sub-categories and differences, such as the 'mumsy mums' and 'crafty mums' evoked on Mumsnet. This fleshing out of different situational contingencies, priorities, capabilities and preferences arguably has the effect of broadening the discourse of the good mother by setting out the many-and-varied ways that this subject position can be named and instantiated, as well as the different rationalities used to justify a claim to being a good mum. As Townley (2008) has argued, broadly-framed institutional rationalities (such as those pertaining to the institution of the family) can be contested by reference to more local, 'situational rationalities' which justify what we actually do in our everyday concrete lives (p. 134). In the Mumsnet data, contributors were not only rationalizing their actions, but also contesting some aspects of the 'intensive parenting' discourse. For example, the assumed importance of intensive home-schooling was re-signified by some contributors as a failure to comprehend the immediate needs of children for security and comfort during times of uncertainty and crisis.

Mumsnet can facilitate a discursive 'trying on' of different ways to inhabit hegemonic subject positions (e.g., Williams, 2002). This discursive enactment of a 'possible self' (Markus & Nurius, 1986) is important and valuable in an anonymous SNS because the risk of sanction is limited: the only information that others have is a contributor's anonymous (and easily changed) user-ID. There are advantages to getting feedback and hearing about others' situations,

because this can broaden the scope of 'reasonableness' and also indicate *which* justifications are more persuasive than others. In practice, a common consensus is not usually achieved on Mumsnet, partly because no single contributor has more legitimizing authority than another. Nor is consensus necessarily a desirable outcome for the members, especially if consensus becomes normative in an unhelpful way, for example, before a wide range of contingencies have been explored. Furthermore, it is quite possible that emerging narratives in the public sphere, from viral social media stories, or news headlines from national statistics offices or popular journalists, would soon start influencing Mumsnet contributors and discussions. One example from the time-period researched is the April 19, 2020 article from the UK tabloid news source, *Daily Mail*, which valorized the professional women who had 'discovered' how much they loved being 'domestic goddesses'.[11] This kind of media narrative reinforces a gendered division of labor and can inhibit the local (bottom-up) rationalizing of alternative ways of being a working parent that was nascent on Mumsnet in the early days of the COVID pandemic. Thus, the new labels and rationalities are emergent but not yet performative unless picked up and repeated.

Turning to the wider relevance of this study, the research highlights the power of discursive struggles over the category-labeling and rationalizations that sustain or destabilize dominant subject positions. Anonymous SNS, with their large and often heterogeneous membership, enable an expanded range of situational contingencies and 'small stories' to be told, where anonymous conversational partners give their responses as to whether any given account of one's actions seems a legitimate and intelligible account of oneself (Butler, 2005). New ways of inhabiting subject positions are discussed, and potentially expand the agentic possibilities for an audience that might want to 'try on' (Williams, 2002) variations of an established position. Nevertheless, I acknowledge that the findings are delimited and bounded: the data pertain to disruptive circumstances in the early phase of the COVID-19 pandemic and are derived from conversations within a demographic that may be more willing to debate and challenge the established norms around identities such as the good mother. The insights from this early time-slice of the pandemic may have relevance to other situations of crisis which open a discursive space to query the rationalities behind norms of social action and justify new ways of behaving.

Online discussions do not unfold in a vacuum, of course. Further research of a longitudinal nature would enable genealogical questions to be investigated, providing insights into the dynamic evolution of gendered discourses. The power of media narratives and celebrity influencers, for example, to control the direction of forum discussions and public debate would be an important area of future research.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Mumsnet talk (social networking site) at https://www.mumsnet.com/talk.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The Coronavirus Act gained Royal Assent on 25 March 2020, and lockdown measures legally came into force on 26 March (https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-act-2020-status).

[2] PPE = Personal Protective Equipment, such as protective clothing

[3] In post-structuralist discourse theory, 'subject positions' is a term often used in preference to 'roles' (see Davies & Harré, 1990 for a discussion)

[4] https://www.mumsnet.com/i/faqs—last accessed 7/9/2021

[5] https://www.mumsnet.com/i/advertising—last accessed 7/6/2022

[6] https://www.maxqda.com

[7] The acronym OP is often used to denote either the original post, or the original poster (the person)

[8] FB = Facebook

[9] PJs = Pyjamas

[10] ADHD = Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

[11] https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-8234977/Desperately-happy-housewives.html

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