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Abstract

The article investigates the conceptualisation of the good and bad mother from the point of view of users of the UK parenting website Mumsnet, which offers the opportunity to assess the dominant ideologies of motherhood at play in contemporary middle-class British society. The study uses Hays' (1996) discussion of the Intensive Mothering ideology and Johnston and Swanson's (2003) typology of contemporary mothering ideologies in analysing the mothers' discussions. It is argued that, on Mumsnet, mothers actively engage with, re-work and to a certain extent resist the good mother ideal. It is also suggested that the users of Mumsnet are very conscious of the role that the media plays in the construction of the ideals of motherhood and are also aware of how such ideals might change through time. Anonymous forums such as Mumsnet can offer a space for the reality of the maternal experience to be articulated in resistance to the ideology of the good mother.

Keywords: Mothering; good mother; bad mother; Mumsnet

Introduction

There is considerable pressure on mothers in contemporary Western society to be a 'good mother'. But what makes a mother 'good' or 'bad', and how do mothers prove that they are good? Mothers are presented by the media with a variety of different stereotypes to choose from, ranging from the earth mother who devotes her every waking hour to her children, to the supermom who holds down a full-time career while 'juggling' childcare and domestic tasks. Competing and contradictory ideologies of motherhood offer different definitions of the good mother, making it difficult for a woman to judge her own mothering, but also offering the possibility of picking and choosing from the criteria for good motherhood.

An Internet discussion forum, such as the one hosted by the UK parenting site Mumsnet, offers the possibility of exploring mothering concepts such as the good and bad mother from the viewpoint of mothers themselves. While mothers have always shared knowledge amongst themselves, one of the most common and efficient ways to do this in contemporary Western society is online (Crosby 2011; Lupton et al 2016). Mothers use internet discussion forums and social media to create and disseminate their own personal views about motherhood, and thus a study of discussions on good and bad mothering on Mumsnet offers the opportunity to assess the dominant ideologies of motherhood at play in contemporary British society.

While there has been a good amount of research focused on the production and replication of mothering ideologies in the media and wider society, less research has focused on how mothers themselves internalize or resist such models. This article therefore investigates the conceptualisation of the good and bad mother

from the point of view of users of Mumsnet, one of the largest and most well-known parenting sites in the UK. Using analysis of discussion threads on the subject taken from the forum's discussion boards, the article asks: How do these users conceptualise the good and bad mother? How conscious are they of the good mother ideal? Is the ideal of the good mother one to which they aspire? How far do they criticise this ideal? The study uses Hays' (1996) conceptualisation of the Intensive Mothering ideology and Johnston and Swanson's (2003) typology of contemporary mothering ideologies in analysing the mothers' discussions. It suggests that, while neo-traditionalist and economic-nurturing ideologies are frequently referenced by users of Mumsnet, there is also a strong assertion of the feminist model, with its emphasis on mothers finding fulfilment and empowerment outside the home and a more equal share of childcare with others. While this may not be surprising on such a middle-class site with a high proportion of professional working mothers, it is also argued that, on Mumsnet, mothers actively engage with, re-work and to a certain extent resist the good mother ideal. In her discussion of Intensive Mothering, Hays (1996) argued the mothers tend to follow contemporary models unconsciously, perceiving these expectations of motherhood as natural and necessary. However, it is suggested that the users of Mumsnet are very conscious of the role that the media plays in the construction of the ideals of motherhood and also aware of how such ideals might change through time.

Ideologies of motherhood

Previous scholars have focused on how ideologies of mothering are constructed by society, the media, parenting advice and the health-care profession. However,

there has only been a limited amount of investigation into how mothers themselves construct their own mothering identity. In their work on the portrayal of motherhood in women's magazines, Johnston and Swanson (2003) call for further research into how mothers internalize or resist the myths perpetuated in the media, and it is the aim of this article to contribute by investigating the issue through the use of Mumsnetters' discussion of the matter.

The ascendant motherhood ideology in contemporary society has been identified as Intensive Mothering. Hays (1996) suggests that there are three main tenets to this ideology: childcare is viewed as primarily the responsibility of the mother; it should be child-centred; and children 'exist outside of market valuation and are sacred, innocent and pure, their price immeasurable' (p.54). For the Intensive mother, childcare is all-consuming, emotionally satisfying, and guided by expert advice, with the child's needs more important than those of the mother. An Intensive Mothering ideology thus leads to a traditional domestic set-up, with the father as bread-winner and the mother's primary role being in the home. However, unlike earlier traditional family patterns, in the neo-traditional home the focus is on the children rather than the husband/father. In their analysis of media depictions of stay-at-home-mothers, Kuperberg and Stone (2008) suggest that we are seeing the emergence of a new feminine mystique, with the role of the mother replacing that of the wife. Moving beyond the usual dichotomy of earth mother versus supermom, Johnston and Swanson (2003) identify four contemporary mothering ideologies: traditionalist, feminist, neo-traditionalist and economic nurturing. While their traditionalist and neo-traditionalist models are similar in their emphasis on the mother as full-time caregiver in the home, they suggest that the neo-traditionalist mother is one who has resigned from the

workplace (possibly only part time) in order to focus exclusively on her child. Neo-traditionalists use feminist values such as choice in order to justify their decisions in terms of empowerment, and monitor their child's development carefully with the use of expert advice. The feminist model of mothering, in comparison, promotes parent-shared childcare and rewarding employment, with the mother seeking empowerment outside the home as well as within. Similar to the feminist model, the economic-nurturing mother also seeks employment outside the home, but primarily in order to bring benefits to her children, such as additional goods and services that can be purchased through her earnings.

It is implied that the economic-nurturing mother works out of the home for the benefit of her children rather than her own well-being, although Hochschild (1997) suggests that mothers can feel more rewarded and valued at their jobs than at home. Johnston and Swanson (2006) agree, arguing that, while some mothers alter their work status to live up to the requirements of intensive mothering, working part-time and not seeking promotions, others might reframe good mothering to include fulfillment at work. Christopher (2015) suggests that working mothers construct scripts of 'Extensive mothering', redefining the good mother to include the delegation of day-to-day childcare to others, while still being ultimately responsible for their children's welfare, and stressing the benefits that accrue to both their children and themselves through their work outside the house. Full-time employed mothers may have different definitions of what a good mother is than part-time employed mothers or stay-at-home mothers, thus leading to what Steiner (2006) has termed 'mommy wars' between the different groups.

Women come to understand what is expected from good mothers from society,

the media, health-care professionals, parenting manuals, magazines, newspapers and the Internet. Douglas and Michaels (2004), for example, explore the popular media's romanticizing of motherhood and the insistence that no woman is fulfilled unless she is a mother. They identify a post-feminist construction of Intensive Mothering as 'new momism', tying good motherhood to consumerism. They also highlight the media's obsession with celebrity mothers and its framing of them as either good or bad. Charlesworth (2014) agrees that celebrity mothers play an important role in setting parameters for contemporary motherhood, from the intensive mothering of Angelina Jolie or Gwyneth Paltrow, to 'bad' mothers such as Britney ('Unfitney') Spears. At the same time, reality television allows viewers a glimpse of the more 'warts and all', 'good-enough' approach to mothering of reality television stars such as Kerry Katona or Katie Price (Feasey 2012).

Mothers thus glean from the media and wider society how easy it is to tip over into delinquent or bad motherhood. To take one example, a good mother knows that she should breastfeed her baby, but not for too long or in too obvious a way. Mothers come to understand that a good mother should persevere with breastfeeding no matter how inconvenient or painful it might be for her, selflessly putting her baby's needs above those of her own. However, mothers who breastfeed beyond the baby years or embarrass others by public breastfeeding might be deemed morally deviant (Murphy 1999). Breastfeeding mothers also have a responsibility to consider the child's needs to bond with its father – is breastfeeding too selfish an act? – in which case expressing milk might be a solution. This issue can allow mothers who formula feed to take the moral high ground, emphasizing how their choice allows the father and other family members to feed and bond with the baby. Thus this one act of caregiving demonstrates how

each decision a mother makes can be framed as difficult, offering the possibility of good, selfless mothering but also delinquent selfishness.

The media also has a hand in shaping how we define the bad mother. While romantic comedies and family films show us the idealized family, contemporary horror films frequently depict the darker side of family life with portrayals of delinquent mothers. Hager and Herzog (2015) characterize such bad mothers in horror films as either Overfeeding or Starving, with Overfeeding mothers smothering their child with an over-involvement in their lives, meaning that the child remains dependent and infantile. One example they give is the mother in Hitchcock's *Psycho.* In contrast, Starving mothers are cold and impatient, emotionally distant, viewing children as an annoyance and obstacle. Hager and Herzog use the example of the mother in *The Ring*, who throws her daughter into a well when she does not fulfill her expectations, to illustrate the Starving mother. Both types of bad mother are selfish rather than the selfless good mother, although there is some suggestion that capitalist society sees the over-devoted mother who 'has no life' as somewhat worse than the more detached worker outside the home (Hager and Herzog 2015; Johnston and Swanson 2003).

We also see depictions of bad mothers in the news media: mothers who have abused, neglected or abandoned their children. Ladd-Taylor and Umansky (1998) argue that the definition of the bad mother can be stretched to include all those who do not fit with the ideal of white, middle-class motherhood – welfare mothers, black mothers, single mothers, teen mothers, older mothers and career mothers. Prolific mothers with a high number of children might also be added here. The ultimate bad mother of course is one who murders her child. Ingebretsen's (2001) analysis of the media coverage of Susan Smith, who murdered her two young

children by fastening them into their carseats and then rolling the car into a lake, discusses how Smith was 'monstered' as an unnatural and failed mother by the media, but also used to demonstrate larger civic failures. Newspaper coverage discussed the implications of Smith's actions for mothers and national mores in general, turning Smith's story into a cautionary tale of an evil mother. The media is fascinated by such cautionary tales of mothers who are deemed not to have kept their children safe, such as Lindy Chamberlain, Patsy Ramsey and Kate McCann, all of whom have been monstered by the media, presenting their behavior as outside the conventions imposed by good motherhood, an approach described by Goc (2009) as 'Medea framing'.

Thus the modern mother is faced with a contradictory array of requirements for the 'good mother'. She must be the principal caregiver to her children and must find complete fulfillment in such a role. However, she should not be smothering and over-protective. She should always be there for her children, but at the same time should provide a good role model by demonstrating self-fulfillment and job satisfaction. She should produce independent and well-rounded citizens, but also give them unconditional love whatever they do and however they turn out. Motherwork is a lifetime vocation, with the need to maintain the 'good mother' ideology throughout a woman's life, even when her children have left home (Dillaway 2006). As many scholars on the subject point out, it is basically impossible to do all this well, leading to maternal guilt. Foucault (1978) suggests that the role of a hegemonic ideology is to support the dominant power in society and that this power can only be maintained when subordinate groups continue to fail. Thus the hegemonic ideology of Intensive Mothering supports a patriarchal society where mothers are set up to fail.

Mumsnet

The UK parenting site Mumsnet was established in 2000 by a sports journalist and television producer who met at antenatal classes. The stated aim of the site is to 'To make parents' lives easier by pooling knowledge and experience'. It is the largest parenting website in the UK with its discussion boards, Mumsnet Talk, receiving over 6 million monthly unique visitors. It is seen by both the media and politicians in the UK as being particularly influential with middle-class mothers, which led, for example, to web chats with leaders of the main political parties during the run up to the General Election in 2015. Its demographic make-up is slightly different from other parenting sites in the UK, attracting a comparatively older group of mothers who are more likely to have undertaken higher education and to be working outside the home than rival sites such as Netmums (Pedersen and Smithson 2013). A 2009 census of its members by Mumsnet found that 74% of respondents had a household income over the national average, which is reflected in the fact that many of the advertisements on the site are for aspirational products and services (Mumsnet 2009).

Mumsnet has been described as an 'Internet phenomenon' (*The Daily Telegraph*), 'a virtual shoulder to lean on' (*The Observer*) and the 'daddy' of all parenting sites (*The Times*). Previous researchers on Mumsnet have discussed its more or less supportive nature, formation of an online community, growing feminist voice, affective practices and construction of a neoliberal and consumerist motherhood (Phillips and Broderick, 2014; Jensen, 2013; Pedersen and Smithson, 2013; Gambles 2010; Pedersen and Smithson, 2010). Others have used the discussion forum to investigate Mumsnetters' attitudes to politics, headlice, reality television,

the zombie apocalypse and sex (Hine, 2014; Leaning, 2014; Pedersen, 2014; Jackson *et al*, 2013; Skeggs and Wood, 2012). All point to the site's predominantly middle-class nature and its high proportion of university educated and economically privileged mothers. Jensen describes a typical Mumsnetter as 'a subject of social and economic privilege: middle class, university educated, online and digitally competent' and points out that '[s]ignificantly, the offensive language that Mumsnetters are urged to report does not extend to classism' (Jensen, 2013, 127-145) while McRobbie (2013) describes the site as embodying 'professional middle-class maternity'. Mumnetters are predominately female, although the site advertises itself as 'by parents, for parents'. Mumsnet suggests that men make up 2-5% of core users of the site, but the majority of male users are careful in their use of what is seen as female territory (Pedersen, 2015). Gambles (2010) argues that Mumsnet represents a type of public parenting in a social context in which parents are held to be more responsible than ever for the economic, social and educational success of their children. Jensen (2013) agrees and argues that 'Mumsnetiquette' provides an implicit script to participants, predicated on individualism, entrepreneurialism, and a fantasy of self-reliance and that, while it offers a place to vent and to manage the impossible demands of contemporary intensive parenting, this is often done in ways that collude with neoliberal parenting culture. It is thus interesting to investigate the ways in which good and bad mothering are discussed on Mumsnet and how the different possible ideologies of motherhood are understood and used on the site. Given its middle-class nature and the high number of working-out-of-the home mothers on the site, how far can the Intensive Mothering ideal be accepted or adapted?

Methodology

The Mumsnet discussion boards offer an archive that is fully searchable by both members and non-members. In order to post or start discussion threads, posters need to be registered with Mumsnet. However, the discussion board is public and can be read by all. Following previous researchers who have investigated this and other parenting forums using archival searches (for example Hine, 2014; Pedersen, 2014; Skea *et al*, 2008), a search was conducted for threads containing the terms 'good mother' and 'bad mother' in their title. Whilst it was initially thought that some kind of temporal limits would need to be imposed, given the popularity of Mumsnet's discussion boards, it was interesting to find that, between 2000 and 2015, these terms had in fact been used comparatively infrequently. Only 50 threads that used the term 'good mother' in the title were identified and 178 threads using the term 'bad mother'. The first 50 'bad mother' threads presented by the search engine in terms of relevance were selected for analysis with the 50 'good mother' threads. Following Suzuki and Calzo (2004) the selected threads were copied into a Word file and then analysed thematically to ascertain the main topic of the opening post. This was a grounded coding process that involved several passes through the data to identify a stable set of themes. Themes identified included media influences; selfish/selflessness; self-doubt and generational tensions.

Following Appleton *et al* (2014), Brady and Guerin (2010) and the recommendations of the Association of Internet Researchers ethics working committee (Markham and Buchanan, 2012), the discussion forum on Mumsnet is considered to be in the public sphere since it is not password protected and has a large number of registered users. This was a purely observational study with no

attempt made to contact posters or solicit any further personal details. Posters to Mumsnet use pseudonymous posting names, but these have been removed from any text quoted here to further protect posters' anonymity.

Defining the 'good' mother

Of the 50 threads identified that used the term 'good mother' in the thread title, it is interesting to note that 16 were stimulated by a television programme or newspaper/magazine article that had used the term, suggesting that this is a phrase more popular in the wider media culture than it is on Mumsnet. Seven of these threads were about a Channel 4 television programme broadcast in January 2012 entitled 'How to be a good mother' presented by the comedian and writer Sharon Horgan. In the programme, Horgan 'meets mums with unconventional methods who are sure they are getting it right' (Channel 4). One of the mothers in the programme had admitted that she was a Mumsnetter so the threads included speculation about who this might be (as mentioned previously, Mumsnet posters use pseudonyms).

Interestingly, an apology was posted on the website of the Independent Placenta Encapsulation Network by the Director of the Network, Lynnea Shrief, who was featured in the programme. In it she stated: 'I would like to express my deepest apologies for any hurt or discomfort caused to anyone by the comments made about c-section births during the filming of Sharon Horgan: How to be a good mother. I would like to emphasis that when taking part in this show I was informed that the title would be 'Sharon Horgan Mums', not 'How to be a good mother'. None of the mothers in this documentary wanted to come across like we 'know' how to be good mothers, we just parent our children the way we know

best.' Thus even the women included in this film were unaware that the programme would reference the 'good mother' ideal, and rejected it.

There were also threads inspired by articles on the subject of the good mother in *The Guardian*, *The Independent, The Australian, The Daily Mail, The Jeremy Kyle Show* (UK television programme) and *Huffington Post*. It thus seems that a good proportion of the discussion of the concept of the 'good mother' on Mumsnet was stimulated by media discussion in the first place rather than coming directly from Mumsnetters. This supports the arguments of scholars such as Douglas and Michaels (2004) that the media is important in the dissemination of the ideology of the good mother, even when the women portrayed in the media explicitly reject this term, as demonstrated by the Channel 4 programme discussed above.

A further thread related to the media was started in January 2011 by one of the founders of Mumsnet, Justine Roberts, who had been asked to write an introduction to a magazine special issue on the subject of 'What makes a good mother?' She asked in her opening post what Mumsnetters thought the qualities of a good mother were and whether they had changed for their generation compared to their mothers. There were 80 posts on this thread. An analysis of the responses show that the most frequently mentioned concept was to love your children and show them that love. The second most frequently given answer related to keeping a sense of humour and fun. Also popular were setting boundaries in order to give your child a sense of security; patience; and the ability to listen. Interestingly, although one poster said 'not like my mother', four other posters thought that their own mother had been a good mother and modelled themselves on her.

Several posters, however, queried the whole concept of 'the good mother': 'Every time we try to label what a "good" parent is, we risk alienating (or at least worrying) those who do not tick the particular box'. Other posters were more comfortable with the idea of the 'good-enough' mother. The Intensive Mothering ideal of the good mother as selfless and completely fulfilled by a total focus on her children was explicitly rejected by several posters: 'Never ever use the term "Happy baby, happy Mummy". That's the day you wake up and find you've lost yourself.' 'Never having a night away or trusting a babysitter isn't a virtue', 'I think it is dangerous to be a "mummy martyr"'.There was also evidence that several posters preferred what Johnston and Swanson (2003) identify as the feminist model of motherhood, with one poster objecting to the term 'good mother' because it minimised the role of the father: 'I think that perpetuating the idealised image of "the mother" takes the responsibility of parenting from the other side'.

There were some interesting responses relating to the question of how motherhood had changed for this generation. One poster identified several differences between herself and the way her mother and grandmother had parented on issues such as breastfeeding ('There was no pressure to breast feed'); settling to sleep ('Your goal was to get them sleeping from day dot. A lot of stories of sugar and water and letting them cry it out'); and parenting advice ('Our generation, If we are not reading about foods our kids shouldn't have, breast V bottle, then we are thumbing our way through our collection of books telling us how we should bring up our kids'). This reliance on expert parenting advice is identified by Johnston and Swanson as part of the neo-traditional ideal where children's development is carefully monitored according to books, magazines and websites. Both this poster and others suggested that their mothers and

grandmothers had been 'emotionally detached' and 'less affectionate'. Overall she felt that 'my mum's generation were a bit too selfish or just slightly ignorant'. The examples that this poster used in her comparisons suggest that she was influenced by the Intensive Mothering ideal, seeing it as the right way to mother, but was also conscious of the 'pressure' that such a model placed on a mother and the contemporary requirement for good mothers to work at the role and rely on the advice of experts. It is interesting that she used the term 'a bit too selfish' to describe her mother's generation. Many of the approaches to parenting she describes are focused on making the baby fit in with the household, rather than the household fitting around the baby's needs – which can be associated with Johnston and Swanson's 'traditional' mothering approach rather than the 'neo-traditional' or 'intensive mothering' focus on the primacy of the child. Another poster agreed, suggesting 'My parents in their mid-60's have admitted to "parenting blindly", with little thought about what they are doing or their kids' basic needs'. Again, this poster was critical of the previous generation and their lack of an unresearched approach to parenting.

However, there was also a consciousness of the fact that previous generations did not face the pressures involved in contemporary mothering, with one poster pointing out that, in her mother's day, 'There weren't media images of yummy mummies bouncing back into shape within days' and suggesting that previous generations relied more on help from their neighbours and less on official advice. She ended 'There is no "good enough" mothering in the eyes of the media or government. Mothering is a career with high expectations where failure is all too easy.' Here we have a clear statement of understanding that the hegemonic

ideology of Intensive Mothering supports a patriarchal society where mothers are set up to fail.

Similar threads on the subject of defining the good mother in 2010 and 2015 repeated the focus on love, being there for your children, setting consistent boundaries, letting them make mistakes and supporting them, and listening. There was an emphasis on building confidence in your child and ensuring that he/she is ready to go out into the world. There was also an insistence, however, on the idea that 'none of us are perfect and we will ~~not may~~ fuck up from time to time'. In her study of 'Mumsnetiquette', Jensen (2013) suggests that such rejections of the ideal of the 'perfect mother' and celebration of the fact that all mothers 'fuck up from time to time' resonates across postfeminist parenting culture. However, she argues that engagement in such talk is itself used to demonstrate good motherhood, with confessions of failure taking place within a wider context of careful parenting.

Many thread titles relating to the term 'good mother' implied that the opening poster did not think that they were a good mother or struggled to be one. For example 'Will I ever start to feel like a good mother?'; 'To be worried about DC3 [third child] coming and wondering if I am a good mother' and 'Do good mothers leave their 10 month old to go on a girls' weekend?' Such self-doubt led to several posters craving identification of themselves as a good mother by others – 'Has your mother/father told you that **you** are a good parent?', 'Anyone else really want their MIL [mother-in-law] to think they are a good mother?' Interestingly, there were only four threads identified that stated definitively that the opening poster *was* a good mother. Three of these related to allowing children to do messy artwork in the house and the other was about allowing her daughter to choose the

colour of a new purchase for the home. All of these were concrete things that demonstrated 'good' motherhood rather than being related to the wider emotions and approaches discussed above. However, the claims are related to the Intensive Mothering model of good mothering, with its emphasis on a mother being devoted to nurturing children by providing opportunities for educational fun (one thread described her child's artwork as 'Jackson Pollack [sic] style') rather than housework or other domestic responsibilities. While all three threads on the subject of artwork took an ironic view of the event, suggesting that such 'good mothering' events were rare and caused the mother much hard work, they also allowed posters to demonstrate their child-focused and selfless approach to mothering.

Relating to a more feminist ideal of motherhood, one opening poster objected to the fact that 'It is expected women shall be "good" mothers but good fathers merit compliment'. This thread ran to 39 posts and was placed in the Feminism/Women's Rights topic on the Discussion Board. Responses to the thread were all in agreement with her complaint that, when her husband undertook a basic parenting chore or looked after their child, he was praised for being exceptional while she was just expected to do these things without comment. Many examples were given by posters of times when their own partners had received praise from others – family members, teachers, members of the public – for undertaking childcare.

> Recently we went on holiday. One morning DH [dear husband] took our baby
> down to breakfast so I could lie in for an hour (after I'd got up, fed the baby
> changed him etc so not actually a lie in and had been up numerous times in

the night which he hadn't but y'know). You'd have sworn he deserved a father of the year award the way the staff and other holiday makers reacted.

One of the men [at work] comes in late twice a week because he takes his dc [child] to school those days. And honestly you'd think he was a freaking saint. However, several posters suggested that many women were themselves to blame for the situation by buying into a more neo-traditional approach to motherhood: 'what amazes me is how many of my long-term female friends, who are educated, "career" people and who I would have considered feminists, have slipped so easily into the uber-parent role, and watch (resentfully) as their partners slip into a largely child rearing free role'. In contrast, some posters felt that this was an outdated state of affairs, suggesting that their own approach to parenting was different – more equal – and that as men became more involved in parenting the next generation would have a different view of the role of mothering. Again, as in the discussion of earlier generations' approaches to parenting, this demonstrates an appreciation amongst posters of the fact that parenting models change and that the definition of the good mother is an ever-shifting concept. It also highlights a particular ambivalence on parenting websites concerning the role of fathers. Men who post on such sites can be criticized for disrupting a supportive female space, and some researchers have found a continuance of traditional familial stereotypes online where men are deemed to be incompetent at childcare tasks (Brady and Guerin 2010). While Mumsnet presents itself as being 'for parents', its demographics are overwhelmingly female and male posters can feel unwelcome (Pedersen 2015). While the posters above were annoyed that their partners were praised for any interaction with their children, fathers often report feeling

sidelined as the secondary parent by their partners, families, medical professionals and wider society (Salzmann-Erikson and Eriksson 2013). The praise for fathers undertaking basic childcare tasks discussed above, therefore, should be placed within a wider context of stereotypes of incompetent fatherhood that can be just as much a straitjacket as those of the good mother.

Thus Mumsnet discussion of the ideal of the 'good mother' reveals a certain amount of insecurity and rejection of the term, but also some clear agreement on the traits that a good mother should have. A good mother loved and supported her children, approached parenting with a sense of humour and patience but was able to set boundaries when needed. There was little discussion of whether a good mother should work – although one thread title asked 'Can you be a good mother and also have a great career?' Johnston and Swanson's economic-nurturing model of motherhood sees mothers working out of the home out of necessity rather than to have a 'career' and this question hints at the ambivalence caused by this model and the more career-positive feminist approach to mothering. However, some responses to the threads asking for a definition of a good mother did mention 'being always there' for their children, suggesting that the place for the good mother was in the home. The concrete examples of good mothering mentioned above were also all placed in the home. Nonetheless, there was also resistance to the idea that a mother should be completely subsumed into childcare, with posters urging the need for a mother to have interests outside her children – although to an extent this was also phrased as part of 'good mothering' in that she would then provide a good role model for her children, again reminiscent of Johnston and Swanson's economic nurturing ideal of working outside the home in order to provide material benefits for the children.

Discussion of the mothering of earlier generations was mostly critical, setting up generational tensions, with clear statements that posters' mothers and grandmothers had not worked as hard at mothering and had been emotionally less available for their children – which was deemed to be a more selfish approach. However, there was also an understanding that the definition of a good mother was constantly changing and that the flood of parenting advice and the construction of motherhood in the media could be problematic for contemporary mothers. While the majority of posters seemed to be influenced by the Intensive Mothering model, whilst not explicitly using that term, either accepting its prescriptions of the ideal mother or rejecting them, other models of motherhood, particularly a more feminist approach, could be identified on the discussion forum. A reluctance to embrace the term 'good mother' and a preference for the 'good enough' amongst posters was informed by a variety of factors: self-doubt and culturally enforced insecurity about their maternal abilities, but also a postfeminist embracing and refashioning of some shortcomings as part of good mothering. This mixture of different models and the limited number of threads on the subject that were not stimulated by media references to good mothers, plus the clear appreciation that the definition of good motherhood is changeable, demonstrates that even the quintessentially middle-class Mumsnetters are not entirely comfortable with the good mother ideal and would prefer to discuss parenting in different terms.

The 'bad' mother

In comparison to the 'good' mother threads, those discussing the concept of the bad mother were much more specific to a particular incident. The majority of

threads reported something that had happened and asked whether or not this demonstrated that the poster was a bad mother. A few threads used the term in an evidently humorous way – a toddler who had got into the glitter and a mother who had eaten the children's Easter eggs and had to buy more. Such humorous use of the term fits well with Jensen's discussion of the embracing of parenting failings as part of a display of good motherhood. The humour also fits well with the overall tone of Mumsnet, which celebrates sardonic, educated wit and where users seek entertainment as well as advice or support (Pedersen and Smithson 2013). However, the majority of threads that discussed bad motherhood were less light hearted. Eight threads described the poster finding it difficult to keep her temper with her child (mostly toddlers), two were about arguments with teens and two additional threads described the poster slapping her child. Two threads described the poster leaving her child in the care of her husband because she could not take it any longer. Another group of threads discussed ways in which the poster felt she was not helping her child's development. These included failing to support their reading outside school, poor teeth, the child's separation anxiety, too many video games and constant moves of school because of the mother's job. Three threads described the poster's decision to not breastfeed and another poster asked whether she was a bad mother for sending her child to childcare so that she could have a break. Two other posters confessed that they were bored staying at home with their child. Unlike the good mother threads there were only two references to the media, both related to *The Bad Mother's Handbook,* a humorous novel by Kate Long (2004), and its associated television adaptation (2007).[1]

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[1] This best-selling novel tells the story of a woman in her late thirties who lives with and cares for her elderly mother and her teenage daughter. The viewpoints of all three women are given in the

As can be seen from the descriptions above, many of these issues can be related to the ideal of the good mother – who has patience, is fully focused on her child's development and totally fulfilled by her role as caregiver. In particular, the three threads relating to a decision not to breastfeed or to stop breastfeeding demonstrate the clear link there is in contemporary British society between breastfeeding and being a good mother. The response to those posters who were planning not to breastfeed was generally supportive, although they were urged by many respondents to do more research into the subject before making a final decision. There was a general agreement that, if breastfeeding was making a mother unhappy, she had the right to choose to stop. However, the majority of posters suggested ways to continue breastfeeding, such as mixed feeding and expressing milk, thus giving the message that the poster should reconsider her decision. Overall, the general consensus seemed to be that sometimes a mother needed to make decisions that might be perceived by outsiders as selfish for the good of her own health – and by connection the good of her family. There was, however, also an acknowledgement that this was an emotive issue and that a mother might be criticised whatever she decided – 'I breast fed all four of mine and came up against some prejudice there too so whatever you do will not be right for someone'; 'Search the archives here on MN for witty ripostes for the criticism you'll receive (applies to breast and bottle!!)'.

Responding posters were also mainly supportive of those mothers who confessed to losing their tempers with their children or even smacking them.[2] As one poster

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novel, which is set in Yorkshire and focuses on their personal lives and roles as mothers and daughters.

[2] The UK is one of the only countries in the EU not to ban the smacking of children. Under the 2004 Children's Act it is unlawful for a parent to smack their child except where this amounts to

put it, 'smacking your children is far from ideal, but I think many parents understand how it happens, I have done it myself'. The confessions were mostly met with stories of similar events in the lives of other posters and advice about how to tackle tantrumming toddlers and stroppy teens without losing your own temper. Whilst acknowledging that the specific incident in question was not good, there was little condemnation of the posters but instead support and advice and a rejection of the idea that the poster was a bad mother, 'A bad mother would hurt the baby and not give a shit about doing so'. Key to this lack of condemnation seems to be a poster's display of a conscience about their 'bad' mothering. Links can be made here to the monstering of mothers like Susan Smith, who was depicted in the media as a conscience*less* and unnatural mother. Mothers who demonstrated an awareness of their transgression of the good mother ideal, and were regretful, could be assured that this in fact demonstrated that they were a good mother underneath.

Neither was there condemnation of the posters who confessed to finding their lives at home boring. Again, the majority of posters who responded to these threads agreed that childcare could be dull, 'deeply deeply tedious', as one poster put it, and suggested that the opening poster might want to consider going back to work, at least part time. The high childcare costs in the UK mean that returning to work after her baby is born is very much framed in parts of the media as a mother's 'choice', which might actually cost her family money if she is not in a high-paying profession. Flexible childcare can also be difficult to source, and this means that many low-income families with young children are reliant on welfare

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'reasonable punishment'. There is pressure from charities and other bodies to bring in a total ban on smacking, although this is a controversial subject.

payments. Whilst low-income families can access help to pay for childcare, constant newspaper articles about the benefits of mothers staying at home and the neglect of the children of working mothers in newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* also contribute to a context in which the mother of a pre-school child working out of the home can be constructed as a selfish choice. As discussed above, Mumsnet is different from other parenting websites in its high number of working mothers and it is therefore not surprising to find that on this site a potentially more 'selfish' approach can be recommended for the benefit of both the mother and her family.

One of the longest 'bad mother' threads collected was in fact started by a father, who asked in his thread title: 'Is my wife a bad mother?' In his opening post he described how he and his wife had three children and that he had noticed that the children tended to be 'whiny and very unsmiley'. He ascribed this to the fact that, although his wife looked after the children very well, she did not play with them very much: 'I have spoken to her about it and she says that juggling three kids is hard enough without trying to be a full-time entertainer'. The thread had 93 posts, the majority of which asked precisely what *his* contribution was to interacting with the children, particularly when a later post revealed that he frequently worked away from the home. Several posters opined that children did not need to be constantly played with and that in fact this might make them needy and less able to play and learn independently.

Thus the majority of responding posters to the 'bad mother' threads rejected the idea that the opening poster was a bad mother, offered support and advice and assured her that her experience was not unusual. Even those posters who confessed to slapping their child were assured that they were not bad mothers

because they demonstrated a conscience about their actions. Rather they were women who needed a break and some support. Unlike the definition of a good mother, which was flexible enough to include a variety of behaviours and attitudes, the definition of a bad mother was actually very narrow to these Mumsnetters. As one posters on a thread about boredom put it, 'Not everyone finds the company of small children that thrilling. As long as you're not beating/starving/abandoning her in the middle of the motorway, you're not a bad parent'.

The 'bad mother' threads also suggest that mothers were measuring themselves, or being measured by others, against the Intensive Mothering ideal and feeling that they fell short. They did not feel totally fulfilled by their role as caregiver, found themselves short of patience and worried about their child's development. However, posters who posted about such self-doubt were reassured by other Mumsnetters that their experience was the norm and that others felt the same. The Intensive Mothering ideal was resisted and rejected, and we again see some assertion of other models of motherhood, such as Johnston and Swanson's (2003) feminist model, with its emphasis on mothers finding fulfilment and empowerment outside the home and a more equal share of childcare with others.

Discussion

An Internet discussion forum such as Mumsnet offers the possibility of exploring mothering concepts such as the good and bad mother from the viewpoint of mothers themselves. An analysis of the use of the terms on Mumsnet demonstrates that, while mothers measure themselves against the ideal of the good mother to a certain extent, they are aware of the fact that such ideals change

with time and resist some aspects of the good mother ideal. While there were posters that articulated the opinion that motherhood was 'the most important job in the world' and that a happy baby meant a happy mother, the majority of posters saw the concept of good motherhood in more complex terms. A good mother was ever-loving, patient and supportive of her children, but might also be employed outside the house, occasionally lose her temper and need support from others, and needed to develop interests outside her children. Decisions that, on the face of it, could be perceived as selfish – such as giving up breastfeeding or returning to work – were reworked by commentators on Mumsnet as positive choices that would be beneficial for both the mother and, by extension, the rest of the family.

It is not surprising that a more nuanced approach to Intensive Mothering is to be found on such a middle-class site where the majority of users work at least part time out of the home. However, it was surprising to see how infrequently the concept of the good mother was used in a thread title – both in comparison to the term 'bad mother' and in general. It was also interesting to see how many of the threads about good mothers were actually responses to discussion of the concept in the media, thus demonstrating the importance of the media in the dissemination of the good-mother ideal. There was also evidence that such a widespread ideology led to self-doubt amongst some mothers, who felt that they could not measure up to such an ideal. However, much of the discussion on these threads decisively rejected the good-mother ideal, preferring instead the idea of the 'good-enough mother' and widening the concept of the good mother. Hays (1996) suggested that mothers tend to follow contemporary models unconsciously, perceiving these expectations of motherhood as natural and necessary. However, the users of Mumsnet demonstrated a clear consciousness of

the role that the media plays in the construction of the ideals of motherhood and were also able to dismiss such ideals as unrealistic and created by the media.

It was also interesting to see a clear understanding amongst posters of the fact that the good mother was an ever-changing concept. While posters who discussed the parenting of their own mothers and grandmothers were mostly negative about older women's parenting skills, comparing them to their own more Intensive approach and critical in particular of a lack of emotional involvement and not working hard enough at parenting, there was also an acknowledgement of the pressure contemporary mothers felt. They were in particular critical of the media's involvement in this pressuring of mothers and also the fact that in Western society mothers are set up to fail – that whichever decision they make about their children will be subjected to criticism. The fluidity of 'good motherhood' meant that it was easier for Mumsnetters to define it against 'bad motherhood' – they only knew that they were good mothers because they knew that they were not bad. Some also knew they were good mothers because they defined themselves against the out-of-date 'good motherhood' of older generations, thus also introducing a tension between generations. The owners of Mumsnet have recently established another site – 'Gransnet' – and it would be interesting to undertake a further study of the concept of good motherhood as articulated on that discussion forum to identify differences and similarities in the concepts of good and bad motherhood as discussed by an older generation of mothers.

Returning to the original research questions of this article, this study of Mumsnet demonstrates that mothers on this site are conscious of, actively engaging with, re-working and to a certain extent rejecting the ideal of the good mother. Their

conceptualisation of the good mother is fluid and very much based on defining themselves against bad mothering, which for some is identified with the mothering practices of previous generations. The Intensive Mother ideology current in contemporary UK society means that mothers feel enormous pressure, from the media, family and friends and themselves, to be the selfless, ideal, good mother. This can lead to both self-doubt and criticism of their mothering skills from others. However, middle-class mothers can also reinterpret the concept of the good mother to include more support from their partners and a fulfilling life outside the home, although it should be noted that these more 'selfish' requirements are frequently framed as supporting their role as a good mother, for example as a role model for their children or as necessary for good mental health. At the same time, the 'good-enough' mother is embraced, albeit with a postfeminist refashioning of the admission of mothering failures as part of being a good mother.

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