Virtually Experts: Exploring constructions of mothers’ advice-seeking in online parenting communities

How to cite:

For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© [not recorded]
Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

Virtually Experts: Exploring constructions of mothers’ advice-seeking in online parenting communities

Samantha Mungham & Lisa Lazard

University of Northampton
Park Campus
Boughton Green Road
Northampton
NN2 7AL
Contact: lisa.lazard@northampton.ac.uk
Abstract

Predominant constructions of ‘expert’ parenting advice draw on and become framed by discourses of medical and/or psychological ‘expertise’ and of ‘self-help’ (e.g. Alldred, 1996). However, notions of the importance of advice become increasingly complex within constructions of ‘good’ mothering when mothers are positioned as ‘naturally’ providing the best childcare. This paper explores constructions of mothers’ use of parenting web forums as a site of advice and support. Semi-structured on-line interviews were conducted with five mothers who were recruited through parenting websites. Discursive analysis of the data highlighted how discourses around ‘good’ mothering, marginalised mothering experiences and experiential knowledges worked to position women who sought and gave advice as doing what is ‘best’ for their children. Implications that these constructions have for mothers are discussed.

Keywords

Motherhood, Cyberspace, internet, expert, advice

Introduction

Within contemporary western cultures, parenting advice resources have become increasingly accessible through a range of mediums such as television programmes, books/magazines, and more recently internet websites. The content and delivery of expertise to parents has shifted historically in various ways from more health-focused prescriptive advice to discourses of partnership in which advice is couched as helpful suggestions (Alldred, 1999). However, predominant constructions within expert parenting advice position specialist knowledge as central to ‘successful’ parenting, ‘good’ developmental outcomes, and positions the ‘good’ parent as one whom disavows other forms of knowledge, such as that acquired through
experience, in favour of professional expertise (Marshall, 1991; Marshall and Woollett, 2000; Rúdólfsdóttir, 2000; Murphy, 2003). Given this, Dolev and Zeedyk (2006) argue that parents become implicitly constituted as dependent on experts. Despite a broader increase of critical interrogation of such expert knowledges in popular arenas, Alldred (1999) argues that the status of expert knowledges is still highly valued. The authority accorded to such knowledges may render them difficult to contest and position parental/alternative knowledges as problematic and/or pathological (Alldred, 1999).

While both mothers and fathers become regulated in and through expert discourses, greater emphasis is placed on mothers for ‘good’ child-development outcomes and as such they become centrally located as targets of expert knowledges/interventions (Alldred, 1999; Marshall and Woollett, 2000; Lewis, 2002). For example, despite the use of the gender-neutral term ‘parenting’ in most advice resources, mothers are primarily positioned as main caregiver in the current cultural context (Riggs, 2005; Equal Opportunities Commission, 2005). Given this, mothers are perhaps unsurprising constituted as majority readership of parenting advice (e.g. Rashely, 2005; Green and Groves, 2008; Plantin and Daneback, 2009).

The privileged positioning of expert knowledges on parenting does not render mothers as always-already passive in relation to it. More recently, web-based advice resources have been argued to represent an arena in which mothers’ can and do enact various resistances to expert knowledges. For example, Madge and O’Connor (2006) suggest, the increased availability of online specialist advice/information provides a tool with which traditional modes of expert power can be contested and resisted. In addition to this, the formation of on-line parenting forums and communities has been conceptualised as opening up space for mothers to actively determine what counts in the production of parenting knowledges within their on-line communities (Blair and Takayoshi 1999).
On-line parenting communities may also provide spaces for mothers to trouble and/or evade romanticised constructions of motherhood that are predominant in the current cultural context more generally and in expert child-raising advice specifically. For example, Madge and O’Connor (2006) argue that informal exchanges coupled with anonymity in cyberspace can afford mothers transient breaks from idealised mothering positionings, from disparities between ideals and lived realities of parenting and from feelings of inadequacy produced from such disparities. The web has thus been treated by some scholars as a potential key site for disrupting idealised versions of particular identities, including motherhood, through the ways in which disembodied identities are ‘performatively’ (see Butler, 1990; 1993) (re)produced in cyberspace (e.g. Hardey, 2002).

Broadly speaking, some researchers have suggested that the absence of the material body in digital arenas creates opportunities for greater mobility of identities, allowing people more freedom to move in and out of identifications and play out multiple selves (e.g. Turkle, 1996; Plant, 2000). However, others caution against utopian images of cyberspace, arguing that virtual identities and relationships are not separatable from the complex web of sameness and difference (and inequalities therein) in which we become located and embedded within non-virtual social realities (Fay 2008). Virtual lives inevitably become framed and shaped by the socially and culturally situated identities and experiences of non-virtual selves (Madge and O’Connor, 2005; 2006). This is not to say that transgression is not possible in the process of playing out multiple identities in cyberspace but rather the significance of disembodiment has been, on occasion, overstated.

In this study, we explored the ways in which online advice and support seeking were constructed in mothers’ accounts of their use of web-based parenting forums. Given the significance given to expert advice in the current cultural context, we were particularly
interested in how women negotiated their engagement with informal advice/support and the ways in which such advice-seeking impacted mothering identities.

The Research Process

Participant Recruitment

To elicit mothers’ accounts of using parenting forums, online semi-structured interviews were conducted. We recruited participants via web-based parenting forums. Initially, this process involved making contact with forum administrators of various parenting websites who were provided with an outline and aims of the project. Forum administrators were then asked for their permission to display participant recruitment posters on their websites.

Although the poster was placed on three parenting websites, only members from one UK site responded. This is possibly because this particular site appeared to be associated with a high amount of web traffic which maximized the possibility that the participant advertisement would be seen by a greater number of forum users. Initially, eleven mothers expressed an interest in taking part. However, six of the participants withdrew before the interview was arranged because of time constraints and family commitments. It should be noted that participant recruitment took place during December to mid January. It is not unreasonable to assume that the timing of recruitment may have impacted the response rates as some mothers that made contact noted that this was a particularly busy time for them.
Of the remaining five mothers who agreed to take part, one described herself as a single mother whereas the others positioned their relationships as long-term. All participants identified themselves as heterosexual and had between two and five children. Participants only described themselves in terms of gender and sexuality. Other points of sameness and difference (for example, ‘race’) were not raised by participants.

Once participants had expressed an interest in participation via email they were then given a written explanation of the project. This included a description of ethical rights (as outlined in the British Psychological Society’s ethics guidelines for research) and how the data would be used, a copy of the interview agenda and a consent form. This information was sent by email and by post with a stamped addressed envelope to allow participants to sign and return consent forms. It should be noted that there is a growing body of work which explores how the use of online methodologies can present ethical issues that are unique to this kind of research (Brownlow and O’Dell, 2002). For example, the use of particular information in the public domain as research data, such as web discussion boards, has raised concerns around whether informed consent can be or has been sought (Brownlow and O’Dell, 2002). Such debates informed our decision to focus on accounts generated in online interviews rather than on information displayed and created within parenting forums.

**Online Interviewing: Processes and Reflections**

Semi-structured interviews were all conducted electronically using MSN, a synchronous form of computer-mediated-communication which allows ‘chat’ to occur in real time. Mann and Stewart, (2000) suggest that this can give the interview a more conversational feel as the
programme does not produce long delays between messages which provided a sense of flow between interviewer-interviewee responses. MSN also allows the use of emoticons to textually represent sounds and feeling which can help set a “relational tone” to the interview (Mann and Stewart, 2000, pp.15; see also Mann and Stewart, 2003). Interviews conducted lasted between approximately 50 and 150 minutes. Whilst on-line interviews do not require the use of transcription systems commonly used for oral discursive data, we did want to maximise the readability of transcripts. For this reason, we used conventional forms of punctuation when preparing the transcripts for analysis (see also Bucholtz, 2000).

Important to note is that we make no claims that online interviewing is an identical process to face-to-face techniques. For example, Davis et al (2004) raise specific problems with computer-mediated-communication that impact online interviewing. More specifically, they argue that online interviews tend to generate briefer responses to questions compared to face-to-face interviews because answers are mediated and shaped by the processes of reading and typing skills of conversant. Davis et al also point to how online interaction can be fraught with ambiguity which impacts turn-taking and makes difficult the use of wordplay, metaphor and jokes. This may raise questions about the richness of data produced in online interview studies. However, other researchers suggest that the quality of data produced in online interviews is very much dependent on “who is being interviewed, who the interviewers are, and how skilful they are in online interviewing” (Meho, 2006: 1291) and so, in this respect, do not differ substantially from issues around data production in face-to-face interviews.

In this study, both the researcher conducting the interviews and the participants were reasonably practiced with technologies used. Even so, electronic conversations were marked
by far more moments of asynchrony than would perhaps be experienced in face-to-face interactions. We did not, however, experience this as a ‘problem’ in this research, rather we conceptualised web-based interviewing as maintaining a connection between the methodology and the topic area, embedding relations between the researcher and participant and subsequently the data collected within the digital arena (see, for example, Seymour, 2001 for further discussion).

**Reading Accounts**

The following reading of the data is broadly framed by theoretical/political ideas derived from feminist poststructuralism and is specifically informed by Foucauldian discourse analysis as described by Parker (2005). For Foucault (1969), discourses are “practices that systematically form the objects of which we speak” (p. 49). Discourses are thus conceptualised as a social practice which (re)produce the objects to which they refer in multiple, often contradictory ways. Important to note is that discourses are neither fixed nor universal. Rather they become manifest, take shape and are framed by the different historical and cultural contexts in which they emerge. Given this, discourses are not the product of ‘individual’ activity as such but rather constitute and (re)produce an “array of subject positions” (Parker, 1994, p. 245), which when taken up, shape and constrain, enable and disable, ways of being in the social world (e.g. Parker, 1992).

Subject positionings as well as the discourses they are situated in, differ in terms of access to power that they can offer. Central to analysis of power from Foucauldian perspectives are the ways in which norms work to regulate “the web of everyday existence” (Foucault, 1979, p 183) – referred to by Foucault (1979) as a form of disciplinary power. The workings of disciplinary power highlight the ways in which power is not only negative, that is,
hierarchical and repressive but also positive in the sense that it produces and constitutes objects and subject positionings. The analysis of the operation of power from this perspective centres on the ways material power can be exercised in and through discourses as well as the ways in which relations of power are produced and constituted in and by discursive constructions.

The ways in which Foucauldian-informed discourse analysis lends itself to exploring the productive effect of discourses in the context of power relations and resistance was deemed particularly suited to examine heterosexuality/gendered power relationships in the constitution of mothering more generally and advice seeking in particular. This is not to claim that other forms of discourse analysis cannot or do not explicate power relations. Rather, theoretical insights of Foucault’s work shift analytic focus to the connections between constructions identified [and subject positions therein] and social and cultural practices using notions of disciplinary power which we have found useful in articulating particular power dynamics in mother’s accounts of parenting advice.

Analysis

This section focuses on three constructions identified: (1) professional vs. personal expertise; (2) good mother identities; and (3) empowered mothering communities. This reading will unpack the ways in which notions of experiential knowledges are deployed to produce mothers as doing ‘best’ for their children. We focus on the ways in which experiential learning displaces professional expertise by appeals to the value of lived mothering experience. We also draw attention to the ways in which constructions of women as the primary bearers of child-care experience are used to re(inscribe) the home/family as a
feminine preserve. Whilst there were a number of examples of these constructions in the data set, for the purposes of this paper we have selected those which are the most illustrative of these points.

**Professional Vs Personal Expertise**

Across accounts, mothers’ first experiences of using on-line parenting forums were intimately bound up with and prompted by personal circumstances concerning challenging child-raising issues. Importantly, issues experienced were often implicitly characterised as a ‘deviation’ from the trajectory of ‘normalised’ child development and/or parent-child relationships. This can be seen in the following descriptions:

*K*: *I was looking for info and advice on my sons' behaviour and problems...with my eldest it was for his ADHD & dyspraxia*

*C*: *[the] eldest is 12 and visually impaired, wee one is 9 and ASD .... Autistic Spectrum Disorder... and just huge amounts of ongoing difficulties with both kids.*

*L*: *we were actually fostering at the time and I wanted help on contact with birth parents - our three are adopted...so it was adoption contact issues that got me looking on the net for help*

Here, the internet is constituted as an aid for mothers to negotiate difficult parenting issues. The web becomes positioned as a conduit for additional support for parents and concomitantly children (Madge and O’Connor, 2006). There was a clear sense within
accounts that such information, advice and support were either unavailable in their off-line lives or somehow fell short of what mothers’ needed to manage specific difficulties experienced (e.g. Wodehouse and McGill, 2009). This issue is explicitly addressed in Carla’s account when she discusses some of the hurdles she has experienced in getting specialist support for her child who she suspected had autistic spectrum disorder:

C: I’ve spent 4 years trying to get a diagnosis for [her son] - my wee one …cos ASD can come across as just being a brat - just cos they don’t have social skills and don’t cope in school. So I often got calls from the school going “come get him” - we can’t cope…when his nursery teacher advised me to get a referral to the psych service they put it down to his dad leaving…then the psych said it was that - plus me paying too much attention to his older brother cos of his disability... so with all that it took me 4 yrs to get them to take HIS difficulties seriously. Eventually they took him - full time - into a CAHMS…. They said he needs physio, play therapy, social skills support and psych support and since the diagnosis in May - none of it has come through.

The process of seeking specialist support is constituted in terms of struggle, revealing tensions between expert knowledge and mothers’ experiences. This tension is played out through the privileging of expert specialism over mother’s knowledge by service providers, which manifests here in the process of diagnosis.

When Carla speaks from her position as mother, her voice becomes subsumed by specialist knowledge about childhood problems and becomes further undermined in expert discourses through the location of parents as the ‘root problem’ (Dolev and Zeedyk, 2006). A ‘broken home’ discourse is drawn on to position Carla’s familial relationships as a ‘deviation’ from
the normative nuclear family unit and it is this ‘deviation’ that becomes primarily responsible for ‘poor’ developmental outcomes. Carla’s mothering practices are explicitly problematised through the notion of differential parental treatment of children. Thus Carla becomes positioned as at least partially accountable for her son’s challenging behaviour.

Carla is not, however, passive in her relationship to expert knowledge. Rather, she is positioned as resistant and through this becomes depicted as a mother who will fight against authority to do what is best for her child. In this account, expert knowledge is undermined by the depiction of child-professionals/experts misunderstanding the nature of the problem and unable to ‘cope’ experientially with children’s challenging behaviour. Overall, there is a sense of dislocation of expert knowledge from the context and experience of parenting. This sense of dislocation is illustrated further in Louise’s description of seeking advice on developing relationships with the birth parents of her adopted children:

*L:*...although we had good support from social services I really wanted to know how others managed the contact

Unlike Carla, Louise describes her experience of professional support as positive. However, for Louise it appears that this “good support from social services” fell short. It is implied that what is missing from specialist support is shared experience of the issue. For Louise, it is practical advice that appears is to absent. Across accounts, mothers flagged up the importance of shared understanding embedded in practical experience as central to being helped and being of help. This can be seen in Steph’s discussion of help given to other mothers by other on-line forum users:
**St:** A lot of the members have been through so much, so there is always someone who can help you if you need it ... I think it’s harder to help if you haven’t been there.

Lived experience of parenting issues is constructed as foundational to helping others and becomes the basis on which members are positioned as having a special understanding of particular parenting issues and empathy with other users (Madge and O’Connor, 2005). Thus, the notion of experience becomes a means of validating the importance of knowledge, advice and support (re)produced within on-line communities (Pitts, 2004). This may also work to position professional expertise/support as questionable and/or lacking if it is not rooted in shared understanding of lived realities.

Mothers were constituted as the primary bearers of personal expertise on child-raising. Discussion of men or fathers was limited across the interviews. Indeed, when mentioned men/fathers were only given brief reference. For example, when asked what kind of issues was discussed in parenting forums, Steph replied:

**St:** We talk about normal stuff... Kids, hubbys, life, etc etc.

Here, men become constituted as a topic of conversation rather than active participators in parenting discussions. This implies that women constitute the primary users of parenting forums as well as primary carers of children. This is consistent with claims that mothers constitute the majority of users of parenting forums (e.g. Madge and O’Connor, 2005; Plantin and Daneback, 2009). This construction of mothers was also (re)inscribed through an absence of discussion of how men participated in their children’s lives and in their daily care. The importance assigned to experience serves to position mothers rather than fathers as ‘true’
experts on child-raising. Thus, through ‘doing’, mothers can stake claim to making best provision for their child(ren) which serves as a basis to challenge professional expertise and regulation (Alldred, 1996).

‘Good’ Mother Identities

Notions of mothers as primary carers of children were (re)produced in and through women’s self-descriptions throughout the interviews. Representations of these mothers were saturated with notions of normative femininity which bolstered idealised concomitant identities of ‘good’ mother, ‘good’ woman (Phoenix and Woollett, 1991). Women’s internet usage was constructed primarily as a tool to aid child-care and other various domestic roles. For example, in Kelly’s description of web use she says:

K: I use the gardening sections [of online forums], the special needs sections, education/schooling sections and love all the shopping tips and recipes!

Kelly’s description of her use of the web is focused on her home and children which serves to locate her firmly in the private, domestic sphere with her daily activities and interests constituted as primarily revolving around her family’s needs. Similarly, Steph’s off-line hobbies are focused on the family/home:

St: I enjoy playing games with the kids and husband

The description is the image of idealised family life which draws on traditional notions of the heterosexualised nuclear family unit. Steph is depicted as a good mother in this image through her location in this family unit and active participation in it. For Madge and
O’Connor (2005), on-line anonymity may afford mothers a means with which to gloss over tensions and difficulties in their everyday experiences of parenting and present a more idealised version of motherhood and mothering identity. In doing so, mothers may gain some temporary relief from “the restrictive moralities of motherhood within the (apparent) safety of a female dominated community” (Madge and O’Connor, 2005, P. 91).

Not all the women interviewed were positioned within traditional nuclear family constructions. For example, Carla described herself as a single parent whose partner “left 5 years ago”. In Carla’s account, the experience of being a single parent of two disabled children is constituted through images of struggle and hardship. Her single parent status is constructed as a ‘deviation’ from normative nuclear family structures which can be seen in her comment that where she lives “is all 2.4 children, married couples - kinda stepford wives”. However, she negotiates her outsider status through the portrayal of these other women as “stepford wives” which frames them as hyper-feminine, an extreme, and thus not ‘normal’. Carla’s identity as ‘normal’ serves to (re)position her as a ‘good’ mother that is doing her best. This can be seen further in the following excerpt in which Carla positions both herself and other users of parenting forums as ‘normal’:

C: the kinda - middles class - organised - stepford wives - never seem - on the surface - to have any problems and the druggie - alcoholic - unemployed - single parents - u don’t want to get involved with but [Name of website] has normal ppl [people] but with problems.

A ‘good’ mother identity is constituted here through comparison to two “abnormal” extremes – the hyper-feminine mother who is rendered problematic through her ‘perfection’ and the ‘bad’ mother – who is positioned as unfulfilling of the ‘good’ mother role by virtue of their
addictions and circumstances (Klee, 2002). Users of parenting forums become constituted as ‘good’ mothers through their normality. Interestingly here, the notion of ‘normal’ parenting as difficult can be seen to disrupt romanticised ideals of motherhood with cyberspace positioned as almost a haven from extremes of both idealised and ‘imperfect’ versions of motherhood – a place in which her marginalised status in her non-virtual social circumstances becomes normalised. In the following excerpt, users of parenting website are further positioned as ‘good’ through the act of using on-line technology to seek parenting advice:

*C: if someone cares enough to ask for help with their kids - they are probably doing the best they can to be a good parent to their kids.... just trying to do their best.*

Discourses of motherhood as ‘natural’ predominantly position mothers as ‘instinctively’ knowing what’s best. Within such naturalised discourses, the unknowing mother could be seen as falling short of ‘good’ mothering (Lewis, 2002). However, within Carla’s account, the seeking of on-line help/advice is positioned as an act of ‘good’ mothering because it is treated as evidence of doing best for her child(ren) – a prerequisite of being a ‘good’ mother within idealised versions of motherhood (Lewis, 2002). Online help/advice discussion threads were predominantly constituted as an exercise in confidence-building rather than as a process of learning completely ‘new’ parenting practices:

*C: [website name] has given me the confidence to believe that I am a good mum...whereas even a couple of months ago I was pretty down on myself for that...just the reassurance that you are doing the right thing*
On-line support is constructed as allowing Carla to see herself differently – as a good mother. What is important here is that Carla is portrayed as always having been a good mother; it was her perception rather than her practices that were the ‘problem’. This is not only illustrated in the implicit location of her mothering practices as already ‘good’ but also in the reflective consideration she gives to her current practices through the act of asking for advice/support.

Alldred (1999) notes a shift from seeking prescriptive advice to reassurance and partnership between parents and child-experts around the 1970s. However, as mentioned earlier, this ‘partnership’ retained notions of expert privileged knowledge and authority (Alldred, 1999; Dolev and Zeedyk, 2006). What is interesting in the above excerpt is that reassurance is not sought from professional experts but other forum users which may function to allow mothers by-pass (at least partially) engagement with and negotiation of expert power relations.

**Empowered Mothering Communities: Sharing Knowledge**

Seeking advice/support on-line was described as facilitated by relationship practices established in particular forums. More specifically, parenting forums were constructed as a site in which democratic relationships were played out. This can be seen in Louise’s account where she says:

*L: [there is] a real sense of community - and there are disagreements, sometimes fall outs, but once the topics ended everyone just gets on with it again no grudges - that’s amazing really.*

Webbed through this description of on-line forums is a neo-liberal discourse which
emphasises freedom of expression. Whilst it is recognised that the diversity of expressions produce “disagreements”, the tacit agreement of “no grudges” between users underscores the importance placed on individual opinion. The implicit construction of speaking rights in this account appears to function as an equaliser of power relations between users in the online community. The possibility for holding “grudges” is further mitigated by the de-emotionalisation and depersonalisation of forum debates. This depersonalisation appears to be achieved through the significance placed on liberalised notions of valuing the collective, communal ways of being within forums.

The act of sharing advice/information appears to be firmly embedded within constructions of forums as collective and relational. There is a clear sense of this in Louise’s interview in which she begins by discussing information gathering by forum users on behalf of a pregnant mother of a toddler that had been stranded in another country due to a split with her husband:

*L: The other thing that was good and is prevalent all over the site was the information gathering for her on benefits, housing etc - you feel empowered when someone can tell you what you need to fight something. We are looking at a statutory assessment\(^1\) for the small right now, it’s hard but I feel confident as there are people who really know their stuff on site*

Seeking information is constructed as markedly different from traditional notions of expert/novice hierarchical relationships. There is a clear sense of ‘novice’ forum users as active – not only in seeking out information – but using it to “fight” for shared, collective causes. The use of the word fight is particularly powerful and further underscores the active

\(^1\) Statutory Assessment refers to the assessment of a child's educational abilities and needs for the purposes of identifying whether or what kind of educational support is required. It is conducted by the Local Authority or County council.
participatory role that seekers of knowledge have in its use. Although forum users are differentiated in that “there are [some] people who really know their stuff” this is not represented as a problem in terms of unequal divisions of power. Instead, Louise describes information sharing as “empowering” by enabling challenges to be made by those who perhaps would be limited in the action they could take without such resources. It seems that this empowered sense of information sharing is underpinned by the implicit rules of engagement within forums, that is, democratic, collective and egalitarian. This can be seen in the use of “we” in Louise’s description of information seeking on statutory assessment. Notably, the ‘fight’ in Louise’s description revolves around doing what is best for mothers and children. This can be seen in the reference to helping the stranded mother mentioned earlier and the forum member’s current work on statutory assessment which is concerned with additional resources for children with special educational needs that are not met by current school resources. Thus it seems that more politicised action taken by forum users is explained through reference to their mother identity (Capdevila, 2000) – political action here is constructed as a means of mothers’ doing best by their children. Doing ‘best’ as mothers thus becomes constructed as a complex set of actions which transcend dichotomous representations of the private and public sphere by shifting between broader and more localised child-raising issues. While this construction of political/mothering identities is not new (see, for example, Capdevila, 2000), it could be seen as a challenge to more traditional representations of the idealised mother as primarily located in the private sphere. Indeed, the use of virtual communities to accomplish political actions means that mothers can simultaneously be located as in both the ‘public’ and ‘private’ which, as Youngs (2004) points out, arguably troubles delimited notions of and between these constructs.

Complex Constructions: Summary
As mentioned earlier, the playing out of identities in cyberspace has been conceptualised in some work as (re)producing distinctions between embodied and disembodied selves with the latter attributed more freedom to take up multiple identities. However in a similar vein to Madge and O’Connor (2005), it seems that within the above accounts, mothers’ self-descriptions of their identities in virtual spaces were constituted as grounded in non-virtual contexts and subject positionings. There was a sense across accounts that these mothers were, in various ways, marginalised in particular non-virtual contexts because their experience of parenting was predominantly positioned as non-normative. Thus, web-based parenting forums became constructed as a place of inclusion for mothers who experienced various forms of marginalisation in their non-virtual lives.

We do not wish to idealise or oversimplify constructions of parenting web forums through notions of inclusivity or egalitarianism. The negotiation of competing and contradictory discourses of motherhood in these accounts also pointed to the complex ways in which cyber exchanges and identities can reinscribe an array of problematic power relations that mothers become variously located in. For example, the location of mothers as primary carers for children worked in various ways to (re)produce the heterosexualisation of parenting and gendered division of labour which may serve to (re)produce traditional representations of the ‘good’ mother as well as marginalise parents who do not ‘fit’ into traditionalised family structures (McMahon, 1995; Phoenix and Woollett, 1991; McLeod, 2001; Tasker, 2005). However, importantly, parenting communities seemed to offer a space to contest problematic power relations by, for example, disrupting notions of parental dependency on expert knowledges (Dolev and Zeedyk, 2006). It did so by calling into question the foundations on which expert advice is based, validating experiential knowledges and providing a route to advice/support which could be used to by-pass to some extent expert power relations.
Importantly, the privileging of experiential knowledge in negotiating parenting issues locates and embeds motherhood firmly within the realms of the social contexts in which they emerge. Thus, the importance placed on lived experience of parenting may work to destabilise romanticised ideals of mothering (re)produced more broadly in the current cultural context and more specifically in predominant constructions of expert advice.

1. We would like to acknowledge and thank Jane Callaghan for her helpful comments on a draft of this paper

References


Seymour, W. (2001). In the flesh or online? Exploring qualitative research methodologies. *Qualitative Research*, 1, 147.


**Biographical Note**

Sam Mungham completed this study for her undergraduate dissertation at the University of Northampton, UK. Sam is currently pursuing postgraduate study in the area of teaching and learning. Her interests focus on pedagogical issues, constructions of care, gender, identity and qualitative methodologies.

Lisa Lazard is a senior Lecturer at the University of Northampton, UK. Her main research interests focus on gender, sexualities, gendered violence (particularly sexual harassment), discriminations and exclusions, motherhood and Parenting, identities, feminism and poststructuralism.