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# The figure of a regretful mother on an online discussion board

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## Introduction

In recent years, the digital intimate public, such as that on social media and online discussion forums, has become an important site where intimate lives are shared, played out, recorded, commodified and constituted (Berlant, 2008; Dobson *et al.*, 2018). Berlant (2008) argued that the proliferation of therapeutic discourses has increasingly impelled us to express or confess our intimate thoughts on public platforms. For instance, mothers can complain about children going through the terrible twos, lament the lack of time for themselves, vent about the unequal sharing of childcare and household chores and gauge the appropriateness and legitimacy of frustrations and ‘negative’ maternal emotions, such as exhaustion, anger, irritation and dissatisfaction (Ehrstein *et al.*, 2019; Mustosmäki and Sihto, 2021; Pedersen and Lupton, 2018). Intimacy is created by individuals sharing details of their private lives, private experiences and feelings, often with expectations of validation, relief, connection and a sense of belonging (e.g. Kanai, 2017). However, these interactions might redirect expressions of cultural and intimate discontent in ways that uphold normativity. Post-feminist sensibilities that are affectively mediated in the (digital) intimate public invite women to govern themselves and their intimate relationships, including how they navigate the pressures and burdens of motherhood despite disappointments and relentlessly invest in the happiness of their families (e.g. Gill and Orgad, 2018; Jensen, 2018; Wilson and Chivers Yochim, 2017).

This chapter contributes to discussions on digital and affective intimacies by analysing a discussion thread on regretting motherhood on an anonymous Finnish online discussion board. First, our analysis focuses on the darker side of intimacy. In the discussion thread, protected by the anonymity of the online platform, mothers confessed their struggles with parenthood and experiences of ‘the most forbidden’ emotion of motherhood – that they regret motherhood. Although the mother–child relationship is often culturally considered the most intimate and even symbiotic relational bond,

intimate relations are not only about closeness and warmth but are experienced and lived in varying, often messy, ways. Consequently, intimacy is also ‘always relational to detachment’ (Paasonen, 2018: 110). A child is born into intimacy with their mother, as the newborn does not perceive themselves as a singular subject separate from their mother (e.g. Mjöberg, 2009). This intimacy, which can be seen as life-sustaining and rewarding for the mother, also has a darker side: for the mother, the intimacy and dependency of child/ren might equate with fears or actual experiences of losing one’s autonomy, draining oneself and being ‘swallowed’ by motherhood (e.g. Donath, 2015a, 2015b, 2017; Mustosmäki and Sihto, 2019).

Second, we seek to contribute to discussions on how normative intimacies and ‘pedagogies of intimate lives’ are affectively mediated and also resisted (Dobson *et al.*, 2018). Confessions of exhaustion, loss of autonomy and regret spurred some vivid discussions dense with affect; others targeted these mothers with contempt, dismay and moral judgement; whilst others evinced attempts to understand, provide advice and support, and even relate to the experiences described by mothers who expressed regret. Inspired by Sara Ahmed’s notions of affect (2004) and work on affective figures (2000, 2010), we trace how the affect and meanings that participants directed towards and attached to these confessing and complaining mothers constitute the figure of a regretful mother. However, our analysis is not restricted to the negative affect and moral judgement attached to these confessing mothers (see also Ahmed, 2000; Tyler, 2008). With our open affective-discursive approach that maps a broad range of affective reactions, tenors and orientations towards mothers who expressed unhappiness related to their maternal role, we demonstrate that intimacies are about gradations of proximity and distance (Paasonen, 2018), affectively constituted in the digital intimate public. Thus, in our analysis, the figure of a regretful mother is not constituted as a static, othered abject figure; rather, the qualities of the figure are negotiated and the result of affective formations which are dynamic (inter)connected and becoming in various forms and ways. We aim to bring new perspectives to studies on how normative intimacies are challenged and possibly disrupted in the digital intimate public (e.g. Ehrstein *et al.*, 2019).

## **Il/legible maternal emotions and regretting motherhood**

Despite the vast body of feminist research that has shed light on how motherhood might be a double-edged sword for women, bringing forth emotions that many would consider negative, such as anger, exhaustion, anxiety and mourning for the loss of one’s freedom (Lupton, 2000; Miller, 2005; Sevón 2009; Rich, 1977), some emotions are considered largely outside the

spectrum of acceptable or even possible maternal emotions. One of them is regret. According to Israeli sociologist Orna Donath's (2015a, 2015b, 2017) groundbreaking research on maternal regret, there are many feeling rules and cultural narratives that govern the spectrum of possible and acceptable maternal emotions. While it seems culturally acceptable for mothers to temporarily experience 'negative' emotions related to the maternal role, motherhood is ultimately always constructed as worthwhile. Consequently, maternal regret has remained largely invisible because it does not fit the cultural master narrative of motherhood which states that one might regret not having children, but nobody (at least no woman) regrets having children.

Once Donath's book (2017) on regretting motherhood were translated into various languages and spurred wider societal controversy. Heffernan and Stone (2021a, 2021b) showed how in this debate in Germany, Spain and Anglophone countries, maternal regret was seen as unimaginable and regretful mothers were deemed self-centred, shameless and cold-hearted. Yet confessions of regret also raised considerable discussion that was supportive and sympathetic, evincing that mothers were overburdened and exhausted, in part, due to cultural ideals and demands of good motherhood and the lack of political and social support for (working) mothers (see also Sihto and Mustosmäki, 2021). However, redirecting the discussion to cultural ideals and family policy arguably dilutes the more radical emotion of regret, as regret can be seen as 'treatable' with increasing support to mothers. Consequently, research on regretting motherhood has shed light on a phenomenon that has remained hidden but also illuminates 'the systems of power that compel women to see motherhood in positive terms and as the only available script for femininity' (Heffernan and Stone, 2021: 337). We seek to contribute to these discussions by showing the workings of this system of power in the digital intimate public and how difficult it is to legitimate struggles in motherhood.

### **Affect and figures in the digital intimate public**

To analyse the discussion at hand and especially the affective reactions to maternal regret, we draw on figurative methodology developed by Ahmed (2000, 2004, 2010) and Tyler (2008). In her analysis of the figure of the stranger, Ahmed (2000) proposed that negative feelings and meanings become associated with certain groups of people or figures. This negative affect is not something that resides within an individual but is generated through the association between objects and signs (Ahmed, 2004). The word *figure* may be used to describe the way that specific bodies become overdetermined and are publicly imagined and represented (and are figured)

in excessive, distorted and/or caricatured ways (Tyler, 2008). In her work, Ahmed (2010) constructed the figures of a melancholic migrant, unhappy queer and happy housewife and unpicked the cultural and political work these figures do.

These affective formations of figures resonate with our data as well as ‘imagining’ and ‘figuring’, as on the anonymous discussion board, the public’s knowledge of the situations and lives of the mothers confessing regret was limited to the information about their most intimate feelings and relations revealed in the comments made on the forum. However, the audience mobilised affect and meanings attached to the figure of a mother who regrets having children; they imagined regretful mothers’ personal qualities (as well as the lack of them), choices and failings as well as resources and circumstances in which they lived.

In Ahmed’s (2010) research on genealogy and objects of happiness, she also discussed unhappiness in intimate relations and identified the figure of the (un)happy housewife. Her analysis drew on Betty Friedan’s work in *The Feminine Mystique*, which identified a problem that has no name, exposing the unhappiness and frustrations of American housewives. For Ahmed (2010), ‘the happy housewife is a fantasy figure that erases the signs of labor under the sign of happiness’ (50). The function of this ‘happiness’ is to justify gender norms, such as unequal distribution of labour. Furthermore, ‘bad feelings’ are attributed to other bodies and objects, such as feminism, instead of to the happy object itself. As Ahmed pointed out, ‘feminists are read as being unhappy, such that situations of conflict, violence, and power are read as about the unhappiness of feminists, rather than being what feminists are unhappy about’. For instance, Friedan described how housewives’ unhappiness is often attributed, for instance, to an unskilled plumber instead of the role of stay-at-home mother. Inspired by Ahmed (2010), we analyse what the mothers’ ‘negative’ feelings, regret and struggles are attributed to.

Figurative methodology has been widely applied and developed especially by feminist and media scholars to study cultural re/production and mediation of un/desirable ‘maternal femininity’ (McRobbie, 2013). Scholars have analysed the mobilisation of negative affect, discourse and meanings and drawn out the figures of ‘chav mums’ (Tyler, 2008), ‘benefit broods’ and ‘welfare mothers’ (Jensen and Tyler, 2015) and highlighted how intensely these affective figures have been mobilised in the media, policy and public discourses as symbols of welfare dependency, moral breakdown and anxieties around contemporary motherhood (e.g. Jensen, 2018).

Conversely, there are figures such as the thrifty, happy housewife, who experiences the ‘domestic’ as a site of contentment and the related romance of retreat, or the figure of the do-it-all working mum, emphasising the meaning of hard work and commitment to family and striving for work–life

balance (Allen *et al.*, 2015; Orgad, 2019). These figures call into being subjects who are rational and self-motivated, who govern themselves and make sense of their lives through discourses of freedom, responsibility and choice. Such governance also operates at the level of emotions and feelings, inviting women to adjust their feeling states to maintain happiness (e.g. Ehrstein *et al.*, 2019). Such maternal subject positions shape normative ideals about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ motherhood, what mothers are allowed to feel and be and how to manage their intimate relations, and they invite women and mothers to judge themselves and others against these post-feminist models of successful (and abject) femininity and maternity.

However, in our analysis of mothers who experience regret, we avoid simplifying and distinguishing only monolithic ‘good’ or ‘bad’ maternal figures. While this may pit mothers who regret against normative notions of intimacies and post-feminist ideals, our affective-discursive analysis shows that post-feminist ideals are not simply accepted and circulated. We suggest that analysing affect and meaning-making processes, as they potentially open a wider range of subject positions made available to women and mothers, will reveal some fractures in wider power relations.

## Data and methods

We obtained our data from a thread on the anonymous online discussion board *Vauva.fi*. *Vauva.fi* is one of Finland’s most popular websites, attracting around 400,000 visitors and 5.7 million page views per week in 2021 (a relatively high number, as Finland’s population is 5.5 million). The majority of its discussions focus on pregnancy, children and family life (*vauva* is the Finnish word for *baby*). The topic of the analysed discussion thread can be loosely translated as ‘Those of you who regret having children: does the feeling ease as the children get older?’ The thread, consisting of 754 comments, appeared online in February 2017. Although the first commenter explicitly addressed those who have experienced regretting having children, affective intensities intermeshed and clustered in complex ways as the discussion progressed (cf. Paasonen, 2015). After the first comment, the thread soon filled with other kinds of comments than those describing personal experiences of regret, such as comments trying to make sense of maternal regret, giving advice to those expressing regret or to mothers in general, responding to previous comments, reflecting on one’s own experiences of being or becoming a mother or being a child of a regretful mother/parent.

Analysing affective reactions in the discussion necessitates taking into account the digital architecture of the discussion board from which we collected our data. Discussions can become heated quickly, but even for the

most popular topics, the interest is often short-lived. In the case at hand, the popularity of the discussion thread was intense but relatively short-lived: the comments were written within the span of seven days, with most of the comments (483 in total) written within the first three days of the thread's appearance online.

The way we read online threads often follows a particular pattern: individual comments are often skimmed through quickly or skipped entirely (see Paasonen, 2015). Consequently, reading and replying can be considered an affective practice, as some comments are 'sticky' and garner attention, whereas others do not. On *Vauva.fi*, this skipping is supported to some extent by the architecture of the discussion board, which regulates the format and order in which comments appear. In discussion threads, users see the comments in chronological order, with the twenty oldest comments appearing on the first page of the thread and the newest comments appearing on the last page of the thread.

The thread analysed in this chapter consisted of thirty-nine pages of comments; consequently, commenters most often engaged with the comments appearing on the first page of the thread (i.e. the twenty oldest comments). This can also be seen in the distributions of upvotes and downvotes that particular comments received: the comments on the first page typically attracted the most votes, and as the thread continued, individual comments generally received fewer votes. To examine the affective intensities and 'stickiness' of particular views and comments in the discussion thread, in our analysis, we also pay attention to the numbers of upvotes and downvotes comments received whilst also taking into account that these numbers not only reflect the (un)popularity of particular views but are also shaped by the website's architecture.

In addition to the infrastructure of the board, its anonymity plays a major part in how affect comes into being and circulates in discussions, as anonymous forums have their own, specific affective circuits. Anonymity can invite highly polarised and emotional discussion and commenting styles as participants search for affective intensity (Jensen, 2013; Paasonen, 2015). The dynamics and interaction in threads can appear non-linear, hectic, chaotic and filled with moments of affective intensity. What is often characteristic of online discussions is fast intensification and circulation, the sharpening of affect and the possible flattening of people into 'types' (Paasonen, 2015).

For the purposes of this study, to define affect, we rely on Ahmed's (2004) and Wetherell's (2012) understanding of the interwovenness of meaning-making, discourse and affect. This framework is useful for our analysis of affect circulating in the digital intimate public because it allows us to perceive affect as a social process shaped by a social order but also by digital

technologies and architectures of websites, involving bodies, feeling states and discourses aimed at making sense of the world. In line with Ahmed (2000, 2004, 2010) and Wetherell (2012), we perceive affect and emotions as related and as connected to the meaning-making process. Thus, the public's affective reactions are results of complex becoming of cultural narratives and norms, moods and sensibilities, their personal histories and the architecture of the site. Ahmed (2010) has also defined affect as 'sticky' and as 'what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values and objects' (230). This notion is useful for our analysis because regret appears sticky, drawing the public towards itself, as well as fascinating and simultaneously appalling and worrying. This conceptualisation of affect contrasts with theories of affect that perceive it as sensations, moods and atmospheres that escape the discursive and are ultimately detached from meaning, representation or consciousness (Wetherell, 2012).

### **Affective re/orientations towards the figure of a regretful mother**

We first present the affective orientations that mobilised negative affect towards mothers expressing regret. The figure of a regretful mother was constituted as a maternal figure lacking *will*, *mothering skills* and *competence*. These affective orientations attributed the source of regret to mothers' personal qualities, individualising both the source and solutions to difficulties faced in the maternal role. There were also affective orientations constituting the figure of a regretful mother as a *perfectionist* – somebody who takes the pressures and ideals of motherhood too seriously and ends up 'overdoing' motherhood or who is *unable* to make her own choices regarding motherhood. These orientations recognised external pressures stemming from society yet ultimately saw that individual mothers should 'deal' with these pressures.

However, at times, the source of regret was not directly highlighted as within or outside the mother, and the affective tenor was cooler. Instead of regretful, the mothers were understood as suffering from *mental disorders* or *post-natal depression* and were advised to seek professional help. In these comments, the affective orientations were caring and advising, and regret was seen as a difficult, temporary phase. At times, notions of mental disorders were dense with negative and judgemental affect including resentment, anger and moral worry, and regret was pathologised and deemed unnatural. Although we present the affective orientations and meanings attached to regret as somewhat distinct, the features often overlapped, were sometimes in conflict with one another and also evinced resistance to certain affect and meanings.



**Regret as a matter of attitude?**

Earlier studies on maternal regret shed light on the various ways mothers describe their struggles with parenting. Typical descriptions include loss of autonomy and freedom, exhaustion and missing one's life before children (Donath, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Similarly, in our earlier analysis of women who expressed regretting motherhood (Mustosmäki and Sihto, 2019), mothers confessed that they missed having time for themselves and that, as mothers, they could not live their lives in the way they wanted. Often, these mothers recognised the promise of happiness embedded in the 'happy object' of the nuclear family (see Ahmed, 2010) and experienced disappointment and affective dissonance because they did not 'feel the right way' when in proximity to this happy object (Mustosmäki and Sihto, 2019; Sihto and Mustosmäki, 2021).

In this study, many commenters in the discussion thread directed negative affect towards mothers expressing regret. These comments were often filled with judgement that invited the public to trace the reason for troubles to the mothers themselves, constituting these mothers as weak, incompetent and unable to manage their lives and emotions. According to some comments, what is characteristic of the figure of a regretful mother is *lacking the will* to enjoy her life as it is and to enjoy motherhood. One commenter framed regretful mothers as follows: 'This is a perfect example of an attitude problem. You can be happy now, it is only a matter of attitude' (three upvotes, seventeen downvotes). The existence of regret as such was not denied or reframed. However, regret was seen as originating in mothers wanting 'the wrong things' and their incapability to be happy. Thus, the mother is at fault. This was highlighted in statements such as 'the killjoy and barrier to happiness is looking back at you in the mirror' (ten upvotes, twenty-four downvotes).

The above comment resonates with the notion of 'feminist killjoys' (Ahmed, 2010) who vocalise unhappiness lying beneath happy objects, thus killing the joy of others and causing discomfort in others by revealing their experiences. Such comments also resonate with research on affective and psychic life of neoliberalism and how women are invited to take individual responsibility for their lives and shape their dispositions, behaviour and emotional states to respond with a positive mental attitude to any challenge they face (e.g. Ehrstein *et al.*, 2019).

Comments were also dense with advice on how to 'cure' regret. Regretful mothers were seen as stuck in or paralysed by their feelings and were advised to control their emotions and frustrations (e.g. Jensen, 2018). Such comments suggest that regretful mothers can be 'rehabilitated' by changing their attitude, either towards mothering or towards the feeling of regret. It is not

individual actions but emotions that are quintessential, and one's emotions should be dealt with, as evinced a comment emphasising that 'feelings are just feelings to which one shouldn't give too much space' (one upvote, five downvotes).

Regretful mothers were not only seen as lacking the will to do the things that a mother should do but also as lacking the *will* to enjoy doing those things. Commenters expressed certainty that children can sense that the mother does not have the right affective state attached to motherhood – that she does not enjoy mothering and does not want to do things with her children – and therefore, the children act out to get the attention they desperately need: 'The poor child must be screaming for attention, as you just want to be left alone and not spend time with your child' (119 upvotes, 302 downvotes). These commenters empathised with children as innocent and vulnerable. Making children visible in this way is also a strong affective orientation that invites the intimate public to focus on the alleged damaged morality of mothers expressing regret. These commenters feared that the children would be damaged as well. Such comments mark the problem as originating within the individual and, thus, imply strong but damaged agency: the mothers could enjoy motherhood and their children if they wanted to, but they do not.

In addition to mothers' attitudes and emotion management, another affective orientation invited the public to perceive the figure of a regretful mother as somebody who *lacks the ability to parent*, encouraging the public to see regretful mothers as *incompetent* and lacking knowledge, which results in difficulties and challenges in their everyday lives, leading to maternal regret. This view is reflected in statements such as 'you're not having fun because for some reason your children were not raised to behave well. [...] Raising [children] is a skill, like playing the piano, nothing mystical' (eight upvotes, eighteen downvotes). Thus, the problem was seen as originating in the mothers themselves and their lack of expertise. Mothering was constructed as a skill which every mother should have and which is possible to acquire. These evaluations are explicit in comments stating that children might also be misbehaving because they are going through 'a phase' in their development: 'children have several phases in their development, and parents should be equipped with sufficient information and knowledge of how to cope with these situations. However, the majority of parents do not seem to have any understanding of raising a child' (seven upvotes, nine downvotes). Here, the affective tone invites the public to orient and respond to mothers with (perhaps unsolicited) advice.

These comments highlight that mothers must possess expert knowledge, and this will help them understand how children should be raised. Thus, problems that cause regret, such as difficulties with one's children, can be

solved by seeking knowhow – acquiring more skills in raising children and developing a more thorough understanding of what children are like. This was expected to make the lives of both mothers and children easier and smoother. Commenters sometimes justified their statements with references to research and expert knowledge on (early) childhood, but often, the source of commenters' expertise or knowledge was not considered. In these comments, the use of passive voice asserted a position of power and a connotation that this is shared knowledge. However, these individualising and judgemental comments received more downvotes than upvotes, indicating that these views were also rejected by many participants in the discussion thread. We analyse resistance to these comments offering advice more in the following section.

### **Tired mother, perfectionist mother?**

Many commenters in the discussion forum recognised the ideals of good, intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) as stemming from society and suggested that mothers' feelings of exhaustion and regret come from 'overdoing' motherhood. Thus, they understood the mothers' perfectionism as the problem and the source of regret. The tendency towards perfectionism was projected onto and from other mothers who have set (unnecessarily) high standards in their everyday lives. These other regretful, exhausted mothers have internalised the (impossible) demands and pressures that society imposes on them:

Nobody benefits from a martyred mother who submerges her own needs in favour of others and who is grumpy all the time. [...] The mother does not have to wake up at 6 a.m., even if others would. [...] Nobody has to stay awake when the kids eat their sandwiches whilst sitting on the sofa watching cartoons. [...] Going to restaurants is part of normal upbringing. The age gap between children is nobody's business. Every parent has a right to adjust their routines to cope. Children will just sense that their mom can cope and is not in danger of exploding. I do know some 'supermoms', but I do not believe their children are any happier in reality than the kids of my type of parent, who are a bit less fanatical about 'the job'. (Fourteen upvotes, one downvote)

The above comment shows that regretful mothers were seen as lacking the ability to control their 'need for perfection' and their everyday lives to make things manageable. The discussion thread included detailed instructions, such as in the comment above, on how mothers can cope and find time for themselves in between and during their daily routines. Commenters emphasised that children will not be damaged if a mother strives to be 'less perfect'. These comments reflect ideas about deterministic parenting (see

e.g. Lee *et al.*, 2014), where ‘bad, careless parenting’ is a risk to the child’s emotional development. However, resistance to such deterministic ideas and the affective allure of intensive mothering prevailed in (unsolicited) advice to recognise and resist the cultural demand that a mother should be constantly present for her children. It is notable, however, that mothers were advised to be self-sufficient and not to expect more from society or to seek help. Thus, while recognising the ideals as socially constructed, the advice circulated individualistic solutions and neoliberal sensibilities about individual responsibility, self-sufficiency, the importance of managing one’s feelings and possibilities of ‘having it all with the right mindset’ (Gill and Orgad, 2019). However, these comments dispensing advice were often also met with resistance. The comment below ironises the advice and the striving for ‘optimising’ motherhood present in the previous comment:

Do you think that your children do not understand that when you prepare breakfast for them in the evening, it’s because you do not want to wake up to eat with them? Do you think that your children have not understood that you took them to restaurants early on so that they could get used to it and that it would be easier? Do you think that your children have not understood why they have such a big age gap? Because YOU cannot stand their whining. Your children do sense what kind of mother you are and were. (Ten upvotes, twenty downvotes)

The commenter above opted for ‘humorous trolling’ (Sanfilippo *et al.*, 2018) in reference to an earlier comment which gave detailed advice on how to cope with the everyday challenges of motherhood and suggested that children can ‘sense’ the mother’s emotional states. There were also responses from mothers who rejected these meanings and effects associated with their issues, resisting the idea that difficulties in motherhood can be dealt with by ‘not minding the opinions of others’:

Others do cause enormous stress for me and without children, those others would not be in my life. If I don’t pay attention to them, it won’t make them go away. On the contrary, that would cause even more harm and stress. So, the options are bad and worse.

I feel that the freedom to do things on my terms has been completely taken away from me. Now, I do things on my child’s terms or on the terms of people who have something to do with my child. (Thirty-six upvotes, six downvotes)

Comments such as the one above challenged the idea(l) of happiness embedded in the maternal role and brought forth narratives of loss. Very similarly, regretful mothers rejected suggestions that their feelings and emotions could be dealt with by ‘taking time for yourself’:

Exhausted parents are always advised to take time for themselves and organise childcare, etc. ... But it does not really resolve our issues, at least not for

us who genuinely miss the time before we had our children. These emotions are not just being tired. It is also about the fact that having children has permanently and fundamentally changed our lives and there is no turning back.

The everyday realities of motherhood and the loss of personal autonomy might contrast starkly with the expectations of happiness (Ahmed, 2010) these mothers had prior to having children (Mustosmäki and Sihto, 2019). The affective orientations here created connections and proximities between struggling mothers who expressed regret and sought to explain why they regret and what they miss. Yet the regretful mothers simultaneously created distance by rejecting empathy from those offering the perhaps well-intentioned but unsolicited advice.

### Struggling mother, mentally ill mother?

Some commenters questioned whether it is possible to genuinely regret motherhood or whether it is, in fact, merely a symptom of depression or other mental health issues. Some of these comments expressed tones of moral condemnation, contempt or even hatred. Regretting motherhood was understood as ‘not healthy’ (seventeen upvotes, 141 downvotes), the result of a bad relationship with one’s own mother or a symptom of psychological problems or ‘defects on the emotional side’ (five upvotes, twenty-nine downvotes). Interestingly, the downvotes show some resistance to the script, suggesting that regret cannot be reduced to mental health issues. Some comments even suggested that regret about having children is so far from the cultural narrative of (good) mothering that it is seen as a sign of severe mental disorders or monstrous characteristics. In these comments, regretful mothers were called *sociopaths*, *madwomen*, *child haters* or *potential child murderers*. Such judgemental comments did not open a window for temporarily tired or depressed mothers to grow into good mothers (see also Donath, 2017).

However, many commenters approached the complaints of struggling mothers with sympathy, understanding and support, suggesting that these mothers on the forum were suffering from (post-natal) depression. One commenter stated, ‘I don’t think anyone genuinely regrets their children, the moms here just sound depressed and exhausted to me’ (eighty-one upvotes, 252 downvotes). These expressions are somewhat hesitant, but depression is a more plausible explanation for difficulties experienced with motherhood than the idea that someone might not want to be a mother. The affective tone in these comments could also be rather cool and matter-of-fact and without blame or shame directed towards struggling mothers. It is

interesting that users expressed disagreement with and resistance to the idea of depression explaining the struggles with downvotes.

At times, affective proximity and support were constructed through statements based on personal experience that regret, exhaustion and feeling overwhelmed by motherhood represented a temporary phase and were connected to a phase of life when the commenter was diagnosed with post-natal depression:

I fell into post-natal depression, and when my illness was at its worst, I cried and regretted that I had ever decided to have a child, I was so tired and low. Now that I have received the necessary treatment and help, and some six months have passed, I am doing great with my child and my husband.

These caring, affective orientations were also created in comments perceiving regret as tiredness or depression and freeing the subject of responsibility for the difficult situation and from moral condemnation. Caring orientations were often accompanied by advice on how to move forward in such difficult situations, as regretting mothers were advised to seek professional help and go to therapy. Such messages convey a firm belief that seeking medical help and therapy will help the regretful mothers, which highlights the insinuation of therapeutic culture into intimate relations and parenting (see e.g. Becker, 2005; Furedi, 2003). Therapeutic culture does not deny the existence of negative emotions, as it is emphasised that there is no perfect happiness and relationships are not trouble-free. Rather, it highlights the importance of discussing one's emotions openly and dealing with them, as well as the 'therapeutic capacity' of individuals to analyse themselves and their relationships in cooperation with therapists and medical experts (Illouz, 2008; Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019).

Yet again, these affective orientations attached to the figure of a regretful mother aligned regret with exhaustion and depression and the solutions provided by therapeutic and medical help were downplayed or even rejected:

I've too been disturbed by these ideas that nowadays mothers are only allowed to be tired or depressed, and in that case, they talk at the maternal care centre, are prescribed some medication, take some time for themselves – and abracadabra – mythical maternal figure is ready to continue.

Thus, being tired or depressed have become culturally acceptable and intelligible emotions and feeling states that might be part of the maternal experience (e.g. Jokinen, 1996). These comments also reflect therapeutic ideas about intimate relations, how these ideas have influenced the ways we perceive mother-child relations: although motherhood is demanding and complex, it is essential to recognise difficult feelings and emotions, reflect

on them and deal with them. While some mothers testified from their own experience that, for them, regret was part of temporary depression, and they found therapeutic and medical treatments helpful, not all mothers were willing to align themselves with this figure and these meanings (see also Donath, 2015a, 2015b, 2017). Instead, they wanted to carve out space for a figure that just does not necessarily grow into motherhood.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have brought new perspectives to studies on affective intimacies by analysing a discussion on regretting motherhood on an anonymous Finnish online discussion board. First, our analysis focused on the darker side of intimacy. In the discussion thread, protected by the anonymity of the online platform, mothers confessed their struggles with parenthood and experiences of ‘the most forbidden’ emotion of motherhood – that they regret motherhood. Second, our analysis of affect and meanings attached to mothers expressing regret demonstrated that while neoliberal sensibilities and therapeutic ideals were circulated, they were also resisted and ridiculed.

The figure of a regretful mother was constituted as a maternal figure lacking the *will* to mother as well as mothering *skills* and *competence*. There were also affective orientations that constituted the figure of a regretful mother as a *perfectionist* – as somebody who takes the pressures and ideals of motherhood too seriously and ends up ‘overdoing’ motherhood or who is *unable* to make her own choices regarding motherhood. These orientations recognised external pressures stemming from society yet ultimately saw that individual mothers should ‘deal’ with these pressures. These affective orientations attributed mothers’ personal qualities as the source of their regret, individualising both the sources and solutions to difficulties faced in the maternal role. These orientations circulated and reinforced neoliberal and therapeutic understandings of how individualism has affected our perception of the self not only as a solution but also as the source of problems (Becker, 2005). However, in these comments, addressing regret as regret often seemed difficult. Regret was given various meanings and explanations that affectively circulated around regret but often failed to address it in its own right. Consequently, many of the problems women face were seen as medical rather than societal and personal rather than political (see also Furedi, 2003).

The ideal of personal development, which is characterised by specific social norms and beliefs that act as moral resources from which the public draws, both consciously and unconsciously, were often present in the discussion (Nehring and Kerrigan, 2019). The commenters often highlighted

their own willpower, their control over their own lives and the abilities and competence they possessed – all qualities and dispositions they deemed the mothers who expressed regret were lacking. These comments highlight the ideal of the individualistic neoliberal subject who is self-sufficient, resilient and positive, whatever the outer circumstances are (see also Gill and Orgad, 2018). This ideal subject is self-reliant: she expects a lot from herself but little, if any, help or support from others or the surrounding society.

In some comments, the figure of a regretful mother was affectively constituted as somebody who is not ‘truly’ regretful but suffers from a *mental disorder* or *post-natal depression* and was advised to seek professional help. In some of these comments, the affective orientations were caring and advising, as regret was not seen as regret but as a difficult, temporary phase from which mothers can eventually ‘recover’. Again, neoliberal sensibilities and notions of therapeutic culture were apparent in comments to regretful mothers that promoted the idea that one can overcome such problems either by taking control of one’s life or by talking about the problems and seeking medical help. These notions do certain cultural work on intimate relations as well as on the nature of the mother–child relationship. According to Maksimainen (2010), the biggest promise of therapeutic culture is that relationships between people can always be fixed through negotiation and by dealing with one’s emotions. In its most extreme form, therapeutic culture denies the possibility of tragedy (see also Illouz, 2008).

However, the contribution of this analysis to discussions on the digital intimate public is that the notions of neoliberal, therapeutic and medicalised meanings and affect were not just recognised and reinforced, they were also debated and rejected. Thus, revealing one’s most intimate thoughts and emotions in the digital intimate public, even anonymously, may offer possibilities for new becomings and affective formations to exist. Our analysis of regret and ambivalence and contradictions has shed light on how intimacy, even in the mother–child relationship, is always relational to detachment and gradations of proximity and distance. Mothers miss their own lives, identities, time for themselves and might seek validation for their hopes, desires and frustrations. Yet the vulnerability of children limits the possibilities to resist the intimacy between mothers and children. This vulnerability created distances between women confessing regret, exhaustion and negative feelings as well as commenters in the digital intimate public. The worries over children create complex affective relations, meanings and moralities, limiting mothers’ possibilities to voice out their regret. Thus, motherhood is a fragile terrain on which to combat power relations and act politically outside the intimate public.



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