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**Author(s):** Raudasoja, Mirjam; Sorkkila, Matilda; Laitila, Aarno; Aunola, Kaisa

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# “I feel many contradictory emotions”: Finnish mothers’ discursive struggles with motherhood

Mirjam Raudasoja  | Matilda Sorkkila  | Aarno Laitila  |  
Kaisa Aunola 

Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, Jyväskylä, Finland

## Correspondence

Mirjam Raudasoja, Department of Psychology, University of Jyväskylä, PO Box 35, Kärki, FI-40014 Jyväskylä, Finland.  
Email: mirjam.a.k.raudasojajyu.fi

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## Abstract

**Objective:** The aim of the study was to facilitate the understanding and interpretation of multiple aspects of working with mothers by examining Finnish mothers’ mothering discourses and the interplay among these discourses.

**Background:** According to relational dialectics theory, discourses are systems of meaning that are coproduced in interaction. Although discursive research on motherhood has identified various discourses, research on the interplay among competing motherhood discourses is in its infancy.

**Method:** Qualitative questionnaire data from 479 Finnish mothers of infants were analyzed using contrapuntal analysis. Mothers’ responses to three open-ended questions were analyzed inductively. Emerging themes were identified so as to represent different motherhood discourses, and the power struggle among discourses was addressed.

**Results:** Four discourses were identified. In the *Equality discourse*, parenting was presented as ideally shared between co-parents, and equality between family members and various family forms was promoted. In the *Familistic discourse*, traditional stay-at-home mothering, good housekeeping, and the unity of the family were emphasized. In the *Intensive Mothering discourse*, the importance of the mother to her child was highlighted. In the *Balance discourse*, the needs of all family members were presented as equally important, and flexibility in parenting choices was promoted. The results demonstrated discursive struggles within mothers’ answers, suggesting that contemporary Finnish motherhood is a contested terrain of competing ideologies.

**Conclusion:** The findings suggest that Finnish mothers’ mothering discourses are multivocal and often competing.

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The results contribute to the current understanding of motherhood ideologies and provide new insights to be utilized in counseling and clinical practice.

**KEYWORDS**

families, gender roles, motherhood, mothers, parenting, qualitative methodology

## INTRODUCTION

Becoming a mother is a transitional time of identity construction (Mercer, 2004) and adopting a new social role. During that period, women encounter numerous messages regarding appropriate motherhood in their social environment (Choi et al., 2005). Mothers must negotiate their responsibilities to both work and family (Blair-Loy, 2003), as well as to various mothering ideologies (Abetz & Moore, 2018). Although previous research has demonstrated the coexistence of various mothering discourses in Western cultures (e.g., Dow, 2016; Hays, 1996; Perälä-Littunen, 2007), little is known about how mothers construct the meaning of motherhood through the interplay between these discourses. According to relational dialectics theory (RDT), discourses are systems of meaning that are coproduced in social interaction (Baxter, 2011). However, different discourses do not function on an equal playing field; some discourses are more dominant than others (Baxter, 2011). Discursive struggles are thus crucial elements when investigating whether and how cultural pressures manifest themselves among mothers' discourses. In the present study, we applied RDT to explore Finnish mothers' mothering discourses and the interplay between these discourses during the first year of mothering. The Finnish context provides a promising setting in which to study motherhood from an RDT perspective. In Finnish culture, ideologies of gender equality, individualism, and familism coexist and, thus, are likely to be in competition with one another in the mothering discourse (e.g., Lammi-Taskula, 2007). A strong egalitarian emphasis in politics (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2017) and gendered parenting ideals in the culture (Jallinoja, 2006; Perälä-Littunen, 2007, 2018) may produce contradictory expectations in Finnish mothers. The results of the present study will increase our understanding of motherhood ideologies and provide new insights into the beliefs and cultural pressures that Finnish mothers experience in motherhood. Hopefully, the findings of this study will also provide insights that can be useful for any other cultures dealing with similar contradictory expectations and pressures.

## MOTHERHOOD DISCOURSES IN CONTEMPORARY WESTERN CULTURES

The term "motherhood discourses" refers to the meaning systems of motherhood that circulate in a culture (Baxter, 2011). These discourses represent a given mothering ideology, defining "good mothering" and the role of motherhood in a woman's life (Gunderson & Barrett, 2015; Hays, 1996). Motherhood discourses are embedded in historical and cultural environments and, thus, are influenced by social orders, policies, and values attached to "family" in a particular society, as well as prevailing gender-equality beliefs (Gilbert, 2008). Cultures are positioned differently in the continuum between individualism and collectivism (Hofstede, 2001). Individualism refers to a general belief in personal responsibility for one's life, whereas collectivism refers to valuing the needs of the communal group (e.g., family, church, or nation) over those of the individual (Baxter, 2011; Hofstede, 2001). One would expect that the individualism of contemporary Western cultures would have freed women from "the constraints of marriage and

motherhood" (e.g., Rich, 1995). Indeed, the increasing gender egalitarian attitudes in Europe and the United States have challenged traditionalism, which favors gendered roles in society for men and women (Knight & Brinton, 2017). The development of gender equality has, however, halted since the mid-1990s (Cotter et al., 2011; Knight & Brinton, 2017). Some researchers even speak of a stalling of such (England, 2010) or the end of the gender revolution (Cotter et al., 2011) in Western societies and speak of a renaissance of familism. Traditionally, familism has referred to an ideology that promotes conventional family roles, with gendered responsibilities for earning and childcare (Cotter et al., 2011). More recently, however, the familism of earlier decades has been replaced by egalitarian familism, which supports stay-at-home mothering while also emphasizing gender equality and individual freedom of choice (Cotter et al., 2011).

Contemporary womanhood in the United States has been proposed to entail two competing cognitive schemas that are framed as incompatible (Blair-Loy, 2003): *devotion to work* and *devotion to family*. The schema of devotion to work implies that women should commit most of their time and energy to the occupational world and their careers. The schema of devotion to family, in turn, invites women to see family life as the most precious domain and sacrifice their own endeavors for the well-being of their husband and children. By devoting themselves to one schema, women may feel as if they are betraying the other, resulting in feelings of guilt and regret (Blair-Loy, 2003).

Some research findings suggest that mothers may reconcile contradicting motherhood ideals by reframing them. For example, Blair-Loy (2003) found that high-achieving US mothers decided to work part-time to respond to both work and family devotion schemas. Christopher (2012), in turn, found, among a diverse sample of 40 employed mothers in the United States, that mothers constructed "extensive mothering" as a form of good mothering. Extensive mothering included delegating a substantial amount of childcare to others and reframing good mothering as being ultimately in charge of one's children's well-being. Furthermore, according to Landry (2000) African American mothers cultivate commitment both to family, community, and career alike. In line with this, Dow (2016) demonstrated that African American mothers constructed integrated mothering, which was built on three expectations regarding motherhood (Dow, 2016): mothers should work outside the home, be financially independent, and use kin and community members as caregivers for their children (see also Barnes, 2008). Finally, Segura (1992) suggested that Chicana mothers (mothers of Mexican origin living in the United States) who work in white-collar jobs may need to balance between personal success and maintaining their culture. For these women, both job performance and caretaking work at home reinforce a sense of accomplishment of culture and ethnicity. Both types of work also help maintain gendered social relations.

Overall, contemporary Western mothers seem to be surrounded by many different discourses. Since the 1990s, many conceptualizations, such as "intensive mothering" (Hays, 1996; Henderson et al., 2016), "the mommy myth" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004), and "combative mothering" (Moore & Abetz, 2016) have been proposed. The Intensive Mothering discourse, advocated both by child-rearing experts and mothers themselves, conceptualizes children and mothering as sacred; it emphasizes the responsibility of mothers and intensive child-rearing methods, which require tremendous amounts of energy, time, and financial resources (Hays, 1996). It has been proposed as the dominant discourse in the United States since World War II (Gunderson & Barrett, 2015; Henderson et al., 2016) and described in other Western cultures as well (Henderson et al., 2016; Perälä-Littunen, 2018). Some US scholars claim that the standards for mothering seem to be ever escalating because of media portrayals of "good" and "bad" motherhood, misleading reports of childhood threats, and the marketing of "educational" toys and activities (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). These media influences have increased since the 1980s in the United States, in line with the rise of the intensive mothering ideology and antifeminist backlash in popular culture (Cotter et al., 2011). Social media has further facilitated a competition between mothers regarding who is best (Abetz & Moore, 2018). According

to Abetz and Moore (2018), mothering ideologies have multiplied and solidified, making it necessary to defend one's own parenting choices as the best for one's children.

In the previous literature, different mothering discourses have been identified, and their coexistence within the same culture has been demonstrated. However, research in cultural contexts outside the United States is rare. Moreover, little is known about how these various discourses function in relation to one another in mothers' accounts of motherhood. According to the RDT (Baxter, 2011), discourses can be understood as systems of meaning that are coproduced in interaction. In addition to identifying discourses, it is important to examine their functioning and interpenetration and thus address their power relations (Suter & Norwood, 2017). We argue that motherhood is an ideological terrain that is likely to invoke discursive struggles (Baxter, 2011), even in the most conventional settings (i.e., heterosexual, married, middle-class mothers). By understanding these struggles, it is possible to gain insights into what it means to be a mother in contemporary society.

## THE FINNISH MOTHERHOOD CONTEXT

Finnish culture, like other Western countries, is highly individualistic (Hofstede, 2001). Finnish parenting policy follows the Nordic welfare state model (Määttä & Uusiautti, 2012). Public, state-funded childcare services are available to all children. However, staying at home with a child is financially supported. A maternity allowance—provided for 105 days—is a form of government-subsidized time for mothers to take care of children. The amount depends on mothers' income during the previous year. The first 56 days of this period can be compensated for with up to 90% of salary if the mother is employed. This subsidized period can be prolonged with a parental allowance (158 working days; KELA, 2021), which can be used by either parent but is overwhelmingly (90.5%) used by mothers (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF), 2019a). If the mother is employed during her parental leave and her employer pays her salary during parental leave, these allowances are paid to the employer (KELA, Social insurance institution of Finland, 2021). After maternity leave and parental leave, a parent (either mother or father) may still remain at home with a smaller child home care allowance until the youngest child turns three (KELA, 2021). The employment rate of Finnish mothers of children under age 6 is considerably lower than in other Nordic countries (Ellingsaeter & Leira, 2006). In 2019, only 32% of mothers of infants (children up to 12 months old) were employed (OSF, 2019b).

In Finland, gender equality in parenting, at home, and in the workplace, is considered advanced (Seierstad & Healy, 2012; World Economic Forum, 2010). The official gender equality politics aim to promote equality between women and men and prevent discrimination based on gender, identity, or gender expression (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2017). However, mothers often take primary responsibility for childcare, even when they return to work after maternal leave (Närvi, 2012). Women in Finland also experience more work–family conflict than men do, despite their fewer hours spent on paid work (Öun, 2012). This may be related to the promotion of “modern familism,” which has been increasingly popular in Finnish discourse since the turn of the millennium (Jallinoja, 2006). Based on her inductive analysis of newspaper entries, Jallinoja (2006) proposed that modern familism is built on two principal ideas: (1) “stay-at-home mothering,” which stipulates that mothers should stay at home when their children are small and arrange communal childcare so as to be as home-like as possible (pp. 131–136) and (2) “good parenting,” with the common belief that “lost parenting” (i.e., the overly permissive and neglectful parenting practices evoked by highly individualistic culture) results in “ill-being” for children, adolescents, and families (pp. 112–125). To avoid the consequences of “lost parenting,” modern familism suggests that families should spend more time together, the upbringing of children should be family-centered yet aided by professionals, and parental control should be exerted more often to guide children's development. Jallinoja's

familism represents a form of egalitarian familism (Cotter et al., 2011) that promotes traditional family roles while at the same time emphasizing gender equality and individual freedom of choice. Finnish women may thus be exposed to competing cultural values concerning gender equality, independence, and family values. Competing cultural values are likely to provoke different discourses of motherhood. By exploring how discursive struggles manifest in women's written responses, it is possible to obtain insights into how mothers deal with cultural pressures and stress.

## THE PRESENT STUDY

The present study aimed to identify Finnish mothers' own discourses of mothering and examine the interplay among those discourses. The data were comprised of Finnish mothers' open-ended written responses to survey questions about their mothering experience. The research questions were as follows: (1) What kinds of discourses of motherhood can be identified from Finnish mothers' open-ended responses to survey questions about their parenting resources, desired support, and other matters they wish to mention? (2) How do mothers construct the meaning of motherhood in their responses through the interplay among different motherhood discourses?

The first year after childbirth is a transitional period of changing relationship identity (Mercer, 2004), and therefore, this period was chosen as the scope of the present study. According to Baxter (2011), discursive struggles of relationship identity "can be identified in bold relief" (p. 94) in relationship transitions (such as having a baby). Indeed, Choi et al. (2005) proposed that new mothers struggle with the discrepancy between the myths and realities of motherhood, which may then foster feelings of guilt and shame and increase efforts to perform socially desirable motherhood. We expect that the women in our study will use complex methods to negotiate and shape their motherhood discourses and that these methods will follow hegemonic discourses, such as intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), modern familism (Jallinoja, 2006), and gender egalitarianism (Knight & Brinton, 2017). Because of the strong egalitarian emphasis in politics, it is likely that gender egalitarianism in Finnish mothers' discourse will stand more strongly in contrast with traditional discourses than in other cultures.

## METHOD

### Data collection

The data for the present study were obtained in the context of a larger study (Aunola & Sorkkila, 2018) addressing Finnish parents' demands and resources. From a larger sample of parents ( $n = 1725$  parents; 91% mothers), infants' ( $\leq 1$  year old) mothers were chosen as the focus of the present study ( $n = 479$ ). The background information of the sample is presented in Table S1. The characteristics of the sample should be taken into account when interpreting the results of the present study. Most notably, the sample was ethnically and racially homogenous (99.4% Finnish). As compared to the general population, the educational level of the participants of the present sample was considerably higher (in the sample of the present study, 74% of participants had a university or college degree, whereas in the general population of Finnish women, 36.3% had a university or college degree in 2018; OSF, 2018). The number of children was slightly higher than in the average family (2.14 children in the sample of the present study vs. 1.84 children on average in families with children; OSF, 2019b). Also, participants were more often employed (50%) than mothers of infants in the general population (36%).

The mothers completed the research questionnaire in 2018, either online (79.5%), as advertised via various social media channels, or in person (20.5%) at Child Health Care Centers



located in three Finnish cities. At the Child Health Care Centers, nurses introduced the study to parents at the end of their appointments; the parents then completed the survey and returned it either by dropping it in a box marked for the research in the waiting room or mailing it to the researchers in a prepaid envelope. The survey included questions about parenting, such as questions regarding parenting styles, parental values, and parental burnout. Ethical approval for the overarching research project was obtained from the ethics committee of the relevant university (August 2018). To ensure informed consent, all participants signed a voluntary participation form and received written information about the study. They were informed that the study addresses Finnish parents' experiences about parenting demands and resources. They did not receive any compensation for participation.

In the present study, the answers of 479 mothers to three open-ended questions from the broader questionnaire were analyzed: (1) Resources (*Please write down things that give you joy in parenting and/or help you cope*); (2) Support (*Which kinds of things—for example, support and services—would best foster your well-being and happiness as a parent?*); and (3) Other (*Is there something else that you wish to mention regarding yourself, your family or your parenting?*). Resources were asked about only in the online version of the questionnaire, whereas the other two questions (*Support* and *Other*) were included in both versions of the questionnaire. The open-ended questions were situated in the middle (*Resources* and *Support*) and at the end of the survey (*Other*). Typically, responses ranged from one word to a few paragraphs in length. Of the mothers, 89% answered the question on *Resources*, 78% answered the question on *Support*, and 36% answered the question on *Other* matters. A total of 91% of participants provided answers to at least one open-ended question. All three open-ended survey questions contributed to exploring the research questions. Because parts of the broader questionnaire measured sensitive factors, such as attitudes concerning gender roles and parents' general well-being, it is possible that this context itself affected participants' answers to open-ended questions (i.e., it might have raised up particularly those kinds of discourses into the participants' awareness that relate on these specific topics). This may mean that the contradictions appear more pronounced than they would in a more neutral context.

The survey responses for open-ended questions were originally in Finnish, but the data exemplars were translated into English for the purposes of the present study. The authors played different roles in the design of the study (Authors 2 and 4), data analysis (Author 1), the interpretation of results (Authors 1 and 3), and the verification of results (all authors). None of the authors was directly involved in data collection.

## Data analysis

In the data analysis, the RDT (Baxter, 2011; Baxter et al., 2021) was used as a theoretical framework. The RDT presumes that meanings are likely to emerge from the unequal playing field of various discourses. According to the RDT, discourses are both followed and resisted in communication, and their interaction is characterized by a struggle for meaning between competing discourses (Suter & Norwood, 2017). The benefit of the RDT is the ability to analyze more than one discourse at a time and how discourses are produced in interaction with one another. Different discourses are not equal; rather, dominant discourses hold power over marginalized discourses. Discursive power also reinforces social structures so that groups of people voicing dominant views hold power over less advantaged groups (Baxter et al., 2021). The goal of the RDT is to "open space for voices that are muted or dismissed" (Suter & Norwood, 2017, p. 294), which makes it a critical theory (Baxter et al., 2021).

Following the RDT framework, contrapuntal analysis (see Baxter, 2011) was applied to answer the research questions. To answer the first research question, the six phases of contrapuntal analyses were carried out (Baxter, 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2006): (1) immersing oneself in

the data; (2) initial coding and organizing themes; (3) formulating discourses; (4) reviewing discourses; (5) defining and naming discourses; and (6) locating exemplars. Some answers ( $n = 40$ ; 4.5% of the total number of responses from the 479 mothers in the subsample) to open-ended questions were very short and did not include sufficient information (e.g., “No need for (more) support,” “I don’t know,” or “I can’t imagine”), commented on the practicalities of the research itself, or consisted of explanations of participants’ choices in quantitative sections of the questionnaire. Therefore, these answers were left out of the analysis. In the initial coding (the second phase of data analysis), the raw data were first categorized into elements that represented different subthemes, and then, the overarching themes of discourses (consisting of various subthemes) were identified. Discourses were formulated (the third phase of data analysis) by clustering themes into larger patterns: the discourses were color-coded in the data, and the process was continued until saturation was reached.

In most responses, several ideas could be identified and grouped in many discourse categories, and one textual segment could represent several coexisting discourse types. Because different discourses were expressed by the same participant, participants were not categorized into discourse categories. The identified discourses were tested against additional data, and discourse categories were further defined and named. As a result of this refining process, the themes were reorganized to form four discourses. Finally, the data were analyzed again to test these four categories of discourses. A negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was performed to determine whether there were data segments that did not fit the findings. Finally, exemplars that captured the essence of a given discourse were identified from the data. Quoted persons were given pseudonyms to ensure the anonymity of participants. Throughout the analysis process, an audit trail was kept, including notes on analytical decisions, notes on discussions between researchers, the first analyst’s reflections on the topic and the analysis process, and descriptions of the findings.

To answer the second research question, the analysis was continued to investigate the interplay between the identified discourses. Participants’ alignment or misalignment with discourses was addressed, and discursive practices of addressing several discourses were identified. The power struggle between discourses was addressed by identifying which discourses were given the most legitimacy in each answer. *Monologue* is a type of answer in which only one discourse is expressed, and all other views are absent (Baxter, 2011). If several discourses are identified in one answer, they form a *synchronic interplay*, in which discourses can have a counterpoint relationship to one another in three ways: *negating*, *countering*, and *entertaining*. In negating, the answer lines up with one discursive position, and the alternative meanings are invoked only to be refuted. In countering, one discourse is centered, but limited legitimacy is granted to the alternative discourse(s). Countering is often characterized by particular lexical markers (terms such as “although,” “however,” “but,” “even,” and “only”) and adverbials (e.g., surprisingly) (for a full list, see Baxter, 2011). Finally, entertaining is interplay in which various discourses are in play on an equal plane. It is often marked by a tone of ambivalence, one characterized by certain lexical markers (e.g., “may,” “might,” “could,” “must,” and “either–or”) (Baxter, 2011). Sometimes, the interplay breaks free from the polemic centering and decentering of discourses and, as a result, *hybrids* (i.e., are mixtures of two or more discourses that no longer present the original discourses as competing) or *aesthetic moments* (i.e., transformations of two or more discourses into a new form where original discourses can no longer be identified) emerge (Baxter, 2011). Such elements stand in contrast with typical expressions because they do not reproduce the counterpoint relationship between discourses.

## RESULTS

The first goal of the study was to determine which discourses of motherhood can be identified from Finnish mothers’ descriptions. The inductively identified themes of the discourse are



presented in Table S2. Two overarching themes regarding parenting, consisting of various sub-themes, were identified: (1) parenting is rewarding, and (2) parenting is challenging. By categorizing the subthemes representing these two overarching themes into larger patterns, four discourses were identified: the Equality discourse, the Familistic discourse, the Intensive Mothering discourse, and the Balance discourse.

### **Equality discourse: Equal treatment and support from society matters especially for families who diverge from the norm**

The Equality discourse presented parenting as a shared responsibility between parents. In this discourse, the rewarding aspects of parenthood were attributed to (1) sharing responsibilities between co-parents, (2) having other roles in life apart from parenthood, (3) treating parental leave as temporary, and (4) receiving support from the co-parent and society (see Table S2). For example, Jenna (26 years, one child) explained as follows:

*[My] coping as a parent is improved by a spouse who is equal as a parent and who does housework so that everything does not fall on my shoulders, even though I stay at home with our baby. (Jenna, Resources)*

Jenna suggested that parenting and housework are *equal* responsibilities for mothers and fathers. This view was accentuated with her word choice, that is, preferring *parent* to *mother*. She explained that there should be an equal division of household labor so that “everything does not fall on my shoulders” like an avalanche. Suvi (34 years, one child) wrote:

*My greatest joy is my child. I also appreciate that, in Finland, a mother does not need to give up working and being active in society even though she has children. It is important that my spouse agrees [regarding] how the family leave is distributed [between parents]. (Suvi, Resources)*

Suvi appreciated that mothers can keep their jobs and remain active in society after having children. This was a resource for her. The word “mother” was used to explicate the fact that parents face unequal expectations in society. Suvi hinted at the international context by stating that, in Finland, a mother does not need to cease all other activities (unlike in some other countries). She proposed that parental leave should be distributed between partners by mutual agreement, thus stressing their equal status in this decision. Karoliina (33 years, four children) wrote the following:

*[I would like] support for the relationship as a couple, time together, and respect for the challenging jobs of both partners. My studies [are a form of support for me]. (Karoliina, Support)*

Karoliina explained that the professional lives of “both partners” should be respected equally. Via her word choice, she placed both the mother and the father as equally positioned regarding professional life, implying that women should not be expected to sacrifice more than men for the sake of the family. One shared feature of all themes that constructed parenting as rewarding in the Equality discourse was the negotiation of shared rights and responsibilities.

The challenging aspects of parenthood in the Equality discourse were attributed to (1) inequalities in society, (2) a lack of recognition for different parents and families, (3) expectations that do not fit the parent’s own wishes, and (4) the inexperience of parents themselves. Heidi (37 years, one child) stated the following:

[...] *The fact is that families are diverse and the roles of a woman and a man, which were also given importance in this questionnaire, are not an issue for everybody in the family or for every parenting couple in any way. [However,] for some, it surely is; there are many realities. Equal treatment and support from society matters, especially for families like ours and parents like us, who diverge from the norm. My situation is good, and I receive a lot of support from my friends and family. Otherwise, my divergent family form might be a factor that would make it even more challenging to process and accept difficult emotions related to parenting.* (Heidi, Other)

The Equality discourse could be identified in talk about family composition and attitudes toward families that are somehow different from the norm. For example, Heidi, who lived in a same-sex relationship, negotiated for the importance of legally recognizing all family forms. She proposed that equality and support matter the most for those who are not perceived as “normal,” referring to heteronormativity and its effects in the society. She proposed that the “roles of a woman and a man” are not an issue for every parenting couple, suggesting that gendered expectations within a couple apply only to heterosexual couples. Elisa (32 years, two children) explained as follows:

*We parents of today have no role model for being with children; we know nothing about that, really! When the first baby you can hold is your own, even though you are 30 years old already, you have no knowledge of children, so it is a shock how difficult and time-consuming children are, really. That's how it is, but it is true.* (Elisa, Other)

In the description offered by Elisa, parenting is presented as a shared experience that cannot or should not be divided by gender. Positioning all new *parents* as equally inexperienced regardless of gender served as a justification for what was expressed later: having no time for oneself after having children was described as a shock. Children were described as “difficult” and “time-consuming,” which can be interpreted as a radical move in parenting discussions, that is, taking the perspective of the parent and not the child. Deep discontent with the all-encompassing nature of parenting was justified as inevitable: “That’s how it is, but it is true.” Elisa did not specify whether this all-encompassing parenthood applies similarly to women and men, but she certainly argued that parents can feel this way and not enjoy parenthood. In all challenges in the Equality discourse, an experience of invisibility and related distress was highlighted; challenging aspects of parenthood were attributed to the expectations of the society.

### **Familistic discourse: A clean house and happy children and spouse**

In the Familistic discourse, parenting was approached from the perspective of motherhood. The rewarding aspects of parenthood were attributed to (1) the unity of the family and a good atmosphere in it, (2) the home and everyday life, and (3) the relationship between partners. Emma (22 years, one child) described:

*[There is] a feeling of belonging together: we have a small family of our own.*  
(Emma, Resources)

Emma explained that a feeling of belonging together is what serves as a resource for her. Niina (33 years, four children) and Jonna (30 years, more than four children) described different rewards:

*I am fortunate to have four healthy and obedient children and a husband who supports and helps in everyday life. (Niina, Resources)*

*A clean house and happy children and spouse [is what matters]. (Jonna, Resources)*

Completed household chores could be framed as a resource in and of themselves, as in the response by Jonna. Housework, according to these types of responses, was “owned” by the mothers. Sometimes, as in the quote from Niina, husbands were described as taking part in the household duties, and sometimes, a wish for more participation was expressed; however, the language used to describe these strivings allocated the main responsibility to the mother herself. Husbands “helped” with the chores or “participated” in the housework. Traditional gender roles inside the family were thus unproblematic and presented as natural or justifiable. All themes that presented parenting as rewarding in this discourse were related to the family life and indicated positive feelings.

Challenges related to parenthood were described as (1) attitudes in society that devalue mothers’ work, (2) the tiring amount of work at home, and (3) a lack of financial and practical support. Meeri (32 years, two children) proposed:

*[What is needed is] the message from society that mothers who take care of their children at home provide the best and most precious early education. Now, mothers are wanted to [return to] work as soon as possible. Better financial support [for parents/mothers at home] and more [communal] services to the home, like someone to help with the household chores, [are needed]. (Meeri, Support)*

In Meeri’s answer, parenting was presented as something that women do. Via word choice *mothering*, childcare, and household maintenance are framed as feminine duties. Meeri presents mothering as “the best and most precious early education,” suggesting that home mothering is favorable to institutional childcare. She advocates for more money and support from the state or the commune, suggesting that support for mothers should be arranged institutionally. The partner’s role in alleviating the work strain of the mother was not mentioned, and potential inequalities between partners were not addressed. Mariella (26 years, two children) presented somewhat similar ideas:

*I have had both of my children when I was relatively young if you think of the typical age of becoming a parent in Finland. My spouse is working long hours and, each year, works approximately 70 days around the clock, so I am alone with our children a lot. I am a stay-at-home mother. I wish for more respect for stay-at-home parenting because it is very important and hard work. It should be better supported. (Mariella, Other)*

Mariella defined herself as a *stay-at-home mother*, choosing a gendered expression. She justified this position with the long working hours of her spouse. However, in asking for respect for stay-at-home *parenting*, she proposed that it is possible for men to stay at home with children as well. In this answer, it was not explicit who should stay at home; nevertheless, the roles of the breadwinner and the caregiver were separated, and more respect and support for the home parent were advocated. Laura (34 years, four children) asked for practical help at home:

*Practical help for caring for the house and the children [would be useful]. (Laura, Support)*

In the Familistic discourse, all themes that constructed parenting as challenging addressed a lack of appreciation and support for stay-at-home parents. Being a stay-at-home mother was

presented as an important—perhaps the most important—role in life for a woman but not as a very respected one in society. In this discourse, the focus was on the practical aspects of house-keeping and mothering rather than reflecting on emotional contact with children. This could be understood as reflecting the reality of everyday mothering, legitimizing motherhood as hard work and, at the same time, opposition to the emotionally focused Intensive Mothering discourse.

### **Intensive Mothering discourse: Do I really love my child enough?**

The Intensive Mothering discourse presents parenting as a gendered role, in which mothering is the most influential force in guiding children's growth. The rewarding aspects of parenthood were described using two themes: (1) the close and loving relationship between mother and child and (2) the mother's own developing parenting skills. Lilian (33 years, more than four children) suggested the following:

*Parenting is the most significant task in my life. It has been the most influential thing forming me as a person, and it has most affected the way I am. It takes energy, but it also gives enormously. It is difficult to imagine a greater and more influential task than motherhood. (Lilian, Resources)*

Lilian stated that she enjoys parenting and prioritizes it among life choices. She began with the term "parenting," perhaps as a response to the question asked about parenting. However, at the end of her response, she shifted to the word "motherhood" when providing an overall evaluation of parenting's importance. This shift to gendered language, even after having begun with gender-neutral terms, reflected the Intensive Mothering well: a "mother" was described as the most important person in the life of a child. In addition, motherhood was presented as central to female identity, that is, "the most influential thing forming me as a person." Even when gender-neutral language was used, shared parenthood was rarely mentioned. Linda (30 years, one child) described the following:

*I hope that I will remember the first night with my baby for the rest of my life. The surge of love that rushed my body when sniffing the baby was something confusing and unique. I would bestow that feeling upon everyone. (Linda, Other)*

Mutual love between mother and child was at the heart of Linda's description. Even without mentioning the gender of the parent, she might be suggesting that parenting is a gendered experience. "The first night" obviously refers to the immediate postpartum period, and presenting love as a bodily experience suggests that love has something to do with women's hormones after childbirth. Indeed, the common feature of themes that presented parenting as rewarding in the Intensive Mothering discourse was that motherhood was constructed as inherently enjoyable.

The challenges of parenting were attributed to (1) uncertain knowledge and related feelings of anxiety and guilt and (2) doubt about the quality of institutional day care. Annamaria (32 years, one child) described her experiences:

*Nothing prepared me for parenthood and the feelings of guilt: "Do I really love and take care of my child enough; how can I make sure that my child is safe, happy, and feels loved?" I would do anything for my child and still I feel guilty and doubt whether I do enough and [do things in] the right way in regard to what is best for my child. [I wonder:] "Can I provide enough proper stimuli, sufficiently balanced food, and enough attention and love for my child?" One demands a lot of oneself, and advice*

*and instructions from all around mix with one's own feelings about what would be best. [I ask myself:] "What if it is not the best way, will my child be ruined?" [...] But smiles and the joy of my child give so much back, as does offering a consoling hug to them. I would not change anything. (Annamaria, Other)*

In Annamaria's answer, motherhood was presented as something that requires constant learning and effort to ensure taking care of one's children in the best possible way. Even when using the gender-neutral word *parenting*, it was the mother herself who was described as stressed. A need to be constantly learning expert-level knowledge and parenting skills was expressed, and co-parenting was not mentioned. However, the uncertainty and even anxiety of not knowing for sure what would actually be the best way forward was a challenge, and Annamaria worried about making "wrong" or "less than the best" decisions. Other potential sources—apart from herself—as influences on an infant's development were ignored in Annamaria's answer. From this perspective, feelings of doubt, worry, guilt, and fatigue can also seem to be natural inherent features of motherhood. Sari (34 years, four children) described guilt slightly differently:

*I felt a great amount of guilt when I start working full-time and brought my children to day care. I had lived 8 years either as a stay-at-home mother or working part-time. (Sari, Other)*

Sari constructed stay-at-home mothering as best for small children and expressed doubts about the quality of day care, as well as guilt when her children attended day care. The responsibility for good childcare was placed on herself in this way. One common feature of themes in the Intensive Mothering discourse was that motherhood involves a great deal of responsibility that cannot be passed over or divided.

### **Balance discourse: There is no one single way to do it right**

In the Balance discourse, the rewarding aspects of parenthood were described in terms of three themes: (1) parents can recognize their resources and actively take care of themselves, (2) other people are very important for the coping of parents, and (3) good things should be appreciated because they should not be taken for granted. In the first theme, the means of caring for oneself were not always specified, but relaxation was often mentioned in one form or another. A mother's responsibility for her own well-being was thus constructed as more active than in many other discourses. Ulla (36 years, two children) described the following:

*The key thing for one's own coping is taking care of oneself. When my own needs and family life are in balance, I experience well-being and am a good parent. If one has had no chance to sleep, rest or take me-time, then one has no resources left over for children. (Ulla, Support)*

Ulla suggested that her well-being is on an equal plane with other family members' well-being. She proposed that everyone has the same basic needs and that, if these are not met, a parent may not function well in the parenting role. Katri (32 years, two children) and Emilia (39 years, three children) described the importance of support from other people:

*[What helps me is the] awareness that there is nearly always help available. (Katri, Resources)*

*In the moments when it feels difficult, it is good to hear from, for instance, the Child Health Care Center, neighbors, or relatives about how great and skilled my children are. Despite the mountains of laundry and piles of dust, the most important things are fine. It also helps me to cope when I have a phone call or am messaging with my mother, sisters, or friends or to take a walk in the forest or just get fresh air or be heard by the doctor or nurse at the Child Health Care Center, especially if I feel that my child is not well. With my firstborn, who suffered from heartburn (GERD), I happened to have a very kind public health nurse at the Child Health Care Center, and she saved many situations and was an important supportive person. (Emilia, Resources)*

The roles of other people in parents' well-being were highlighted in these answers. Katri suggested that an awareness that help is available is a resource in itself, and Emilia described situations in which she received support. They suggested that other people's empathy, support, and concrete help make coping easier when things become tough. Finally, an awareness that anything can happen was presented both as a resource in good times and as giving hope when everything was not fine. When one had easier times or some difficulty was overcome, it was easy to feel gratitude. In hard times, as Nea (36 years, two children, Resources) suggested, one could gain strength through the thought that "it will get easier one day."

Three themes could be identified in the Balance discourse as ways of presenting parenting as challenging: (1) external conditions; (2) too-high expectations for parents, especially mothers, with black-and-white opinions of parenting; and (3) a lack of understanding for parents from professionals, peers, or relatives or at the workplace. Johanna (27 years, three children) proposed the following:

*One's own illness or husband's illness (he broke his leg) can put the well-being of the family at stake. In addition, sleeping problems (breastfeeding, teething, etc.) create more challenges. I would be a totally different person if I could sleep well! (Johanna, Other)*

The first theme suggested that anything can happen in life and that parental situations can become quite difficult for anyone. Johanna suggested that challenges are present sometimes and one cannot avoid them always. Aino (32 years, two children) asked for empathy from other people:

*Generally, an empathetic attitude [would be needed] in society, where parents would receive encouragement instead of bad-mouthing and spontaneous help instead of angry looks when you are in trouble with small children in a public place. At work, [I would prefer if] they would not squeeze everything out of parents of small children but create possibilities for part-time work. (Aino, Support)*

The second theme consisted of critiquing rigid methods of understanding good parenting. The pressure to apply one kind of parenting and a lack of flexibility were presented as social pressures that contributed to parents' stress levels, which were resisted in this discourse. Aino suggested empathy and flexibility as solutions. Flexibility in parenting and career choices was constructed as being important: one parenting model is not appropriate for all families. A lack of understanding on the part of other people could leave parents feeling alone with their struggles. In sum, a compassionate attitude on the part of parents toward themselves and from other people was constructed as a prerequisite for parents' coping in the Balance discourse.



## Interplay among discourses

The second research question aimed at determining how mothers constructed meaning through the interplay among motherhood discourses. This task requires identifying whether the text was characterized by discursive monologue or a synchronic interplay of multiple discourses (Baxter & Norwood, 2015), as well as whether the discourses were in a counterpoint relationship to one another. In the responses by the participants in this research, multiple discourses were often found. While monologue was mostly found in the shorter answers, interplay was found both in shorter and longer answers. Monologue was found in Anniina's (35 years, two children) description:

*When having children, the thing that has most annoyed me is the attitude of the workplace. In the beginning of my last pregnancy, I was looking for a job where I could work between parental leave and [the upcoming] maternity leave in order to not be out of work entirely. One employer offered me a job but declined the offer when they heard of my pregnancy. I did not tell the next employer about my pregnancy, and I got the job. (Anniina, Other)*

Anniina described difficulties in having a job while being pregnant because of discrimination. She presented her desire for work as a wish "not to be out of work entirely," which presents unemployment in a negative light. The option of staying at home was not mentioned, but Anniina described herself as committed to finding work. Employers were presented as gatekeepers who may discriminate against women because of their pregnancy, and this was considered annoying (in addition to being illegal). In this case, the centered discourse was the Equality discourse. However, all four identified discourses were found alone in some answers. By exclusively emphasizing one discourse, participants effectively marginalized all other discourses. This could be interpreted as a way to affect the power relations between central and marginalized discourses, following the idea of the discursive power of defining reality. The hegemonic discourse of Intensive Mothering was the discourse that most frequently featured in monologues. However, no single mother produced only one discourse in her answers to all three questions; even when one answer was a monologue, the mother's responses (when provided) to other questions tended to be more discursively expansive.

Synchronic interplay in the responses was typical in the data. All three forms of synchronic interplay—negating, countering, and entertaining—were present in the data. First, although quite a rare occurrence in the data, *negating* existed in some answers. This is illustrated in Tiia's (30 years, one child) answer:

*At the Child Health Care Center, their advice is to ask for help from extended family and parents, but what if you do not have any around? Sometimes, it feels that this advice from the Child Health Care Center lags decades behind, [as if in times past] when communities of families and extended families were closer. (Tiia, Other)*

In Tiia's answer, the legitimacy of the Familistic discourse, which presented supporting parents as the task of the extended family, was completely refuted as outdated and impossible for some families. In this example, no alternative was explicitly offered. What made Tiia's annoyance understandable was the implicit Balance discourse, which actually led nonunderstanding professionals to make parenting more difficult. Another proposition that could be offered as part of the Balance discourse was that parents should receive help that meets their needs. Advice that has no relevance to families today is simply not useful. Tiia's answer demonstrated that the Familistic discourse holds some power but is not so powerful that it cannot be questioned. This answer described the pressure to develop families' services that address the

needs of parents, and this could be understood as an attempt to alter various discourses' power relations.

Second, there were many cases of *countering* in the data. For example, in Pinja's (31 years, one child) answer: "I am really happy that we have a small, lovely daughter, but the change in life came as a surprise" (Pinja, Other). Here, the Intensive Mothering was the dominant discourse, which was accompanied by the more marginal Balance discourse. Pinja suggested that, in addition to feeling happy, new parents may also be surprised at how significant a change it is to have a child. This answer was thus discursively expansive, not limiting itself to reproducing the dominant discourse but also legitimating an alternative discourse. Typically, the Intensive Mothering discourse was centered in discursively rich answers, with a few exceptions. In Mari's (30 years, two children) answer, the Familistic discourse is centered:

*I love my family above all. Doing things together is great, and we are a good team with my husband. Our baby is cared for at home, and thanks to our collaboration, we both work for pay so that we can cope financially. I stay at home most of the time, but I can also work so that [my/lour] income level has not fallen after the [better compensated] parental allowance period [before the extended period that is much less compensated]. (Mari, Other)*

Descriptions of love and belonging in the family were presented as essential in Mari's answer, which represented the Familistic discourse. Childcare at home, mostly performed by the mother herself, also represented the Familistic discourse. However, Mari's chance to work was also presented as important financially. This could be understood as part of the Equality discourse, in which both partners' work is presented as valuable. However, in this answer, the discourses were not in a conflicting relationship but, rather, a complementary one: collaboration between partners and a separation of time at home and at work helped to manage seemingly contradictory discourses. Through these means, alternative discourses were legitimated, which reduced the power of the dominant discourse.

Third, the answers that included *entertaining* were found in responses to all questions. Frequently, they took the form of a list, that is, either a list of resources or a list of the things that a mother should be able to do. Sanna (32 years, one child) lists the following:

*[My resources are] following the development of my child, witnessing the joy and insights of my child, receiving support from people close to me, support from grandparents, studying and success in my studies, moments when I can be alone and do my own things, quiet time, my relationship as a couple when we support each other, breaking everyday routines with a trip to a museum or restaurant. (Sanna, Resources)*

In her response, Sanna presented her resources in terms of the Intensive Mothering (joy related to the child), the Familistic (support from friends and grandparents, the couple's relationship), the Equality (studies), and the Balance discourses (solitude and quiet time). One cannot claim that one idea is more important than another; rather, these discourses function on an equal plane. Roosa (28 years, two children) describes contradictory emotions:

*I have suffered from mental health problems/diseases since the birth of my second child, since 2008. I feel many contradictory emotions concerning motherhood and my work as an entrepreneur. Contradictions between my own needs or desires and the requirements of the environment feel like a never-ending challenge and burden. (Roosa, Other)*

Roosa began with the Balance discourse when describing her mental health problems, mentioning a condition that affects her well-being in motherhood and other areas of life. She continued by contrasting motherhood and work and described having contradictory emotions that pulled her in different directions. Contradictions were also described between the mother's own needs or desires and the requirements of the environment. Even though her description did not explain those pressures in more detail, it could be assumed that Roosa meant that she perceives herself as being pressured to be a perfect mother, which represents the Intensive Mothering discourse. However, one could also interpret this situation as involving pressure to work long hours, which could represent the Equality discourse, regarding the occupational success of women. It is not clear which version was the intended meaning or if Roosa meant both types of pressure. However, her own needs and desires were described as in contradiction with the requirements of her environment. This represents the Balance discourse: a mother must take care of herself as she cares for others. This response had a tone of ambivalence because no one discourse was emphasized above the others.

Occasionally, the discursive struggle was temporarily solved, and discursive hybrids (i.e., mixtures of two or more discourses that no longer present the original discourses as competing) emerged from the data. The qualities of the original discourses were identifiable, but their coexistence formed a new meaning that has analogously been described as discursive "salad dressing" (Baxter, 2011). Katja (38 years, four children) explained:

*I have always returned to the workplace [after parental leave] once the youngest in the family reached about 1 year of age. My husband has a demanding job that occasionally requires long stays away [from home]. Despite this, it feels like our everyday life goes smoothly and we have succeeded in combining a family with several children and work. We share household chores and childcare, and I feel that we enjoy having four children. We spend a lot of time with our children, but we also try to arrange time together as a couple. Sometimes, I honestly wonder why parenting is so often experienced [by others] as difficult and challenging.*  
(Katja, Other)

In this example, Katja began with explaining that, after a 1-year period spent on family leave on several occasions, she had always returned to the workplace. In one sentence, she introduced both the family and the work as spheres that belong to her life, although differently at different times. She framed the work of her husband as challenging and requiring long stays away from home, which may mean that she takes most of the responsibility for the children and home (the Familistic discourse). However, she challenged this interpretation and explained that she and her husband divide the household chores and childcare. In these first sentences, she thus balanced between the Equality discourse and the Familistic discourse, which were not framed as opposites. On the contrary, adopting traditional roles between spouses was framed as temporary (parental leave and her husband staying away at times) and different from other situations in which household chores and childcare were shared, which represented the Equality discourse. Later, she asserted that the couple spends a great deal of time with their children, an expression representing the Intensive Parenting discourse. Time together as a couple was not framed as oppositional to having time for the children, even though this required some active "trying" to arrange. Balancing the roles of mother, worker, and wife was presented as a scheduling decision: different roles were central at different times. Katja had a happy tone in her response, and in the end, she wondered why parenting was so often experienced as challenging by others.

## DISCUSSION

The aim of the present study was to analyze Finnish mothers' mothering discourses and interplay. As a result of contrapuntal analysis, we identified four types of discourse and found that these interplayed among one another in complex ways. The result differs from previous research in important ways. Specifically, our research shows that Finnish mothering discourses may be more varied than previously thought (see, e.g., Perälä-Littunen, 2018). Moreover, they often occur in a counterpoint relationship to one another, forming discursive struggles.

It has been proposed that the intensive mothering is the prevalent norm regarding motherhood in contemporary Western societies, particularly in White, privileged populations (Gunderson & Barrett, 2015; Hays, 1996; Rizzo et al., 2013). This discourse is constructed around the idea that the quality of mothering is of essential importance in the development of children (Hays, 1996). In line with this previous research, the Intensive Mothering discourse was also identified in the present study. The finding is in line with earlier Finnish research (see also Närvi, 2012; Perälä-Littunen, 2007; Sevón, 2007) suggesting that the Intensive Mothering discourse is hegemonic in the Finnish context. However, the three other identified discourses (the Equality, the Familistic, and the Balance discourses) served to negotiate for different meanings of motherhood.

Ideologically, the discourse most similar to the Intensive Mothering was the Familistic discourse, which is constructed around the idea of the mother as project leader in the house. The unity of the family and a good atmosphere in it resembled what Jallinoja (2006) identified as central for Modern Familism. It could be argued that the Familistic and the Intensive Mothering discourses are derived from mutually similar assumptions and should thus be treated as one and the same discourse (see Hays, 1996). However, separating the ideas behind these discourses allows us to examine the cultural shifts that have been observed in women's roles within the family more precisely (Green, 2015). In the current research, various themes were incorporated into those discourses to construct motherhood as rewarding and challenging. While the Official familistic ideology assumes that women are to primarily serve their husbands and keep the family functioning, the Intensive Mothering assumes that women will put their children foremost and sacrifice themselves for their children's happiness (Green, 2015). However, both of these discourses may be easy to adopt for mothers of infants in Finland. Government subsidies of parents/mothers staying at home may have impacted how mothers engaged with different discourses, reinforcing either the Familistic or the Intensive Mothering discourses. Thus, structural support can affect how women think and feel about motherhood and parenting.

Our findings suggest that Finnish mothers must find a balance between various discursive constructions of womanhood that encompass both motherhood and other areas of life. Indeed, the two competing schemas suggested by Blair-Loy (2003) were visible in discursive struggles in the present research as mothers tried to position themselves in relationship to both standpoints. The importance of studies, occupation, and career was negotiated in the Equality discourse, which served to negotiate acceptance for a modern, career-focused, or self-fulfilling mothering style and various family forms. This discourse was in line with the Finnish state's official politics on equality (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2017), which are built on the ideal of dual-earner families with equal childcare responsibilities for both parents. This expectation for mothers to work for pay is also similar to the expectations for Black mothers in the United States (Dow, 2016; Landry, 2000). This finding underscores the importance of studying mothering in different cultural contexts: Finnish mothers' responses were often somehow positioned regarding the Equality discourse, either legitimizing or delegitimizing it.

Somewhat unexpectedly, the Balance discourse, consisting of acknowledgment of and respect for the mother's personal limits, was also identified. As the only discourse to explicitly create a gap between ideals and reality, the Balance discourse introduced a new framework for constructing motherhood. The main focus in this discourse was on balancing resources and

managing everyday life. Christopher (2012) introduced somewhat similar ideas in the United States by demonstrating that work is sometimes presented as personally beneficial for the mother, thus moving beyond the child-centered assumptions of the Intensive Mothering. However, in our data, the idea was broader because it also encompassed many themes, from balancing the needs of all family members to challenging the authority of care professionals. In our sample, the Balance discourse could be interpreted as political because it mostly centered around negotiations for change, addressing the perceived expectations of others. Mothers complained that the expectations regarding motherhood were often set too high, and they consequently offered an alternative framework for understanding motherhood. However, this type of discourse also contributed new dimensions to the “ideal worker – ideal mother” dichotomy (Blair-Loy, 2003). In the present study, mothers seemed to alternate between depictions of the “independent woman” and the ideal mother, rather than between the “ideal worker” and the ideal mother. In addition to work, hobbies, leisure, and “me-time” were also mentioned in the replies.

The second aim of our research was to analyze the functions of the various discourses and their interplay. Research that describes the multivocality of different discursive resources in constructing motherhood is rare. The few studies that have been carried out (see, e.g., Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001) have shown that, in order to have other roles in life apart from motherhood, women must often reframe the Intensive Mothering discourse in a more flexible way. A common theme of many studies has been that often women frame paid work and other activities that take them away from their children as ultimately beneficial for the children (Christopher, 2012; Dow, 2016; Elvin-Nowak & Thomsson, 2001), justifying their decisions. The results of the present study are in line with these findings, showing that mothers either actively opposed the intensive mothering, reframed its assumptions, or expressed guilt when not performing according to its standards (see Guendouzi, 2006). For example, delegating childcare to others was framed in many ways in our data, some of them more judgmental and others accepting or favorable. Future research is needed to determine the extent to which fathers use similar justifications in countries where gender equality is advanced. It is suggested that, in Sweden, for example, intensive parenting applies to fathers as well as to mothers (Collins, 2019).

Another similar feature between our data and that of Dow (2016) is related to occupational roles: mothers felt that they were expected to work outside the home and be financially independent. However, in Finland, it is typical for mothers to stay at home for an extended time after childbirth; among children between 9 and 24 months, 41% were still cared for at home in 2020 (OSF, 2021). This practice could contribute to the strategy used by many mothers: they treated maternity leave as a time when gendered roles were acceptable, in opposition to other times when they expected more equal roles. This strategy is likely a contributing factor to the diversity of discourses that were found in Finnish mothers’ answers. However, favoring one discourse at one time and other discourses at other times is a discursive practice that allows for little interaction among discourses. The likely consequence of this practice is that power relations between discourses are resistant to change. In the Finnish mothering context, this may mean that dominant discourses such as the Intensive Mothering and the Familistic discourses are especially powerful for mothers and that they become less so when/if the mother returns to paid work. Moreover, government-subsidized child home care allowances may contribute to the practice of compartmentalizing discourses by encouraging families to see home care periods as separate from other periods in life.

Our findings suggest that discursive struggles are very common in Finnish motherhood discourse. In addition to the discursive monologues present in some answers, synchronic interplay was more common and realized through negating, countering, and entertaining. Mothers addressed conventional ways of defining motherhood when they described parenting discussions of the past and the present; they also addressed the anticipated evaluations of others when



providing justifications for their own views. Occasionally, discursive hybrids emerged, and the struggle for meaning was temporarily dissolved. Discursive struggles manifested themselves among all of the four discourses, suggesting that Finnish mothering discourses occur in counterpoint to one another in multiple and refined ways. However, the Balance discourse was usually identified as a request for change rather than a fully adopted attitude, which may reflect the relatively powerless position of mothers in regard to influencing prevailing cultural concepts (Choi et al., 2005). This can be interpreted to reflect the unequal playing field of discourses: some discourses are more powerful than other discourses. In the present research project, identifying the Balance discourse as a separate discourse can be understood as an attempt to underline the solutions proposed by the mothers themselves to alleviate the contradictions among ideologies.

A limitation of our study was that the sample consisted of highly educated women and the results could have been different in less advantaged groups. Stress factors, for example, may be different in different groups of mothers (e.g., less educated mothers may have more financial concerns). In particular, it would be interesting to study the Balance discourse further. It is possible that there are differences among groups of mothers or situations where this discourse is produced. For example, family size or ethnic group may affect the discourse. However, the mothers in the present research produced rich data, which is a strength of the study. Furthermore, investigating power relations among discourses provides interesting and valuable insights about motherhood. In future research, it could also be insightful to also study samples that somehow deviate from the norm, such as sexual minorities, poor mothers, adoptive mothers, immigrated mothers, and disabled mothers, both in the Finnish context and internationally. Studying fathers and mothers of older children could provide valuable information on the power relations between discourses.

Overall, the present study directs the attention from identifying motherhood discourses to understanding their power relations and interplay and this way expands previous knowledge of motherhood discourses. The findings suggest that Finnish mothers use complex negotiations to navigate through personal and cultural discourses of motherhood. However, cultural idealizations of motherhood may be a significant source of stress for many mothers and may be difficult to resist. The findings can facilitate an understanding of the cultural environment of Finnish mothering and may be useful when planning parental support programs that aim to balance contradictory emotions. For example, realizing that cultural expectations are contradictory may reduce the pressure of mothers to adhere to perfectionist standards. The results can be applied to counseling and clinical practice, especially when working with mothers' parenting stress. Hopefully, the findings can also be utilized in other cultures where similar contradictory pressures for parents are present.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## ORCID

Mirjam Raudasoja  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4680-9708>

Matilda Sorkkila  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2144-1767>

Aarno Laitila  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0865-520X>

Kaisa Aunola  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8866-6736>

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